

GLIMPING THE KINGDOM:
THE COLLABORATIVE WORK OF COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION

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Dedicated to the greater glory of God
and with love to my best friend and faithful wife, Andrea.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis-project looks at the multifaceted decline of Greenville, PA over the second half of the twentieth century and how it has led to a loss of hope for the people who live there. The contents explore the nature of the Kingdom of God as a theological and practical answer to brokenness and decay. Next, this thesis-project explores how two congregations of the town, Hillside Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church, worked together for the sake of joint mission and community revitalization in the hopes of bearing witness to and giving a glimpse of God's Kingdom to the community.

CHAPTER ONE

A GROWING CONCERN: THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

“Here in this worn and weary land / Where many a dream has died /
Like a tree planted by the water / We never will run dry.”

— Mark Hall & Matthew West

The Problem

In my first days as the pastor of Hillside Presbyterian Church in Greenville, PA, I met with the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Greenville to talk about how our congregations might work together for the sake of God’s Kingdom. Although Hillside was formed as a member of the Associate Reformed Synod and First Presbyterian was founded by the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the two congregations are located less than a mile apart on the same street of the same small town, as they have been for nearly two centuries. They have been members of the same denomination since the formation of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1958. When I asked how the congregations have worked together in any meaningful way in the past, he answered, “To my knowledge, they never have; and whenever I have brought it up over the past two decades, past leaders of Hillside indicated that they were not interested.”

Stories like this seem all too common in small town congregations, where leaders are more concerned with their own success than with cooperation. This is especially true when the congregation defines itself, at least in part, by being “different” from its counterpart. In my case, I came to learn that when the town was in its prime, First Presbyterian was known as the congregation of business owners and upper management, while Hillside was primarily populated by

laborers and lower management. “Their grandparents were mean to our grandparents” had become a serious argument as to why our congregations could never consider working together for our mutual benefit and much less for the community’s benefit.

Many of Hillside’s members volunteer in the community in various ways as individuals, yet the congregation has not, as a group, had much of a presence in the community in recent years. Although the church building is one of four churches on the main street of town, the most commonly heard response from community members when Hillside comes up in conversation is to say, “And where is that?” To put it bluntly, Hillside’s mission in the community of Greenville has been anemic, and the congregation acknowledged a need for growth in this area when they first called me to be their pastor. As recently as two years ago, the Hillside mission committee was largely functioning as a check-writing group, doling out small amounts of money to dozens of organizations. Furthermore, the money they distributed came largely from interest from a modest endowment and not from meaningful support from, or knowledge of, the congregation, which is not at all uncommon for congregations as old as Hillside.

While check-writing and other acts of charity may have been a common way of practicing mission in the twentieth century. Recent research from the Barna Group has discovered that a super-majority of Millennials (generally accepted as those born after 1982) say that they are looking for more meaningful interaction with the needy in the Church of the twenty-first century. From their perspective, one of the central commandments of Christianity is to love your

neighbor, and they do not believe that check-writing lives up to that standard. For Millennials, claiming to love “the least of these” without interceding directly on their behalf feels like hypocrisy, and, as Barna observes, “To a generation that prides itself on the ability to smell a fake at ten paces, hypocrisy is a worrisome indictment.”¹ The great irony is that a congregation whose highest goal is recruiting young people to join their ranks has almost no chance of succeeding unless those young people can see that said congregation selflessly cares about the disadvantaged. Although Hillside is certainly doing no worse (and probably doing better) than many churches of its era, it will not have much hope of reaching the next generation unless its approach to mission changes significantly in the coming years.

To make matters worse, Hillside Presbyterian Church exists in a dying town whose decline has been mirrored by a decline in the congregation itself, only exacerbating the already insular mindset of churchgoers. Decline can often lead to a “survival” mentality where members of a congregation raise a metaphorical drawbridge to protect the people and the limited resources they already have. This is, of course, completely contrary to the vision of the Kingdom of God set forth in Scripture, which casts a vision of bold disciples going forth to implement God’s will to heal the hurting and proclaim good news to those who need to hear it most. As such, this thesis-project will explore how recapturing a Kingdom theology will lead congregation members to place a higher priority on

¹ Barna Group, “What Millennials Want When They Visit Church,” *Barna Group*, March 4, 2015, Accessed June 12, 2016, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/711-what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church#.V2rFcoa3M1l>.

the sovereignty, provision, and reign of God in the world, and to care more about their neighbors than they do about themselves.

This may be described as “castle mentality” versus “kingdom mentality.” Members of the Hillside congregation love their building and the people who populate it but too often neglect their responsibility toward those to whom their Lord sends them. The image of a royal court gathering in a castle comes to mind, holding feasts and tournaments while failing to provide for the welfare of the people in the surrounding countryside of the kingdom. Of course, if the people surrounding the castle languish, it will not be long before the castle suffers as well. Trying to maintain a standard of living within the castle while neglecting to care for those without is like trying to maintain the membership and ministry of a congregation while neglecting the work of God’s kingdom and care for the people who are not members of the congregation.

Since the natural instinct of congregations like Hillside appears to be to fear losing to neighboring congregations, this thesis-project pursues the hypothesis that having two congregations work together toward mission in and to the local community would lead both congregations to pursue those things that would benefit the needy in the community. Not only would two congregations pooling their mission resources have a greater chance of making a more significant impact on the community, but this form of cooperative ministry could have a greater chance of providing indirect benefits for the participating congregations, such as renewed energy and perspective. To that end, this thesis-project explores the proposition that forming a joint mission task force with a

neighboring congregation for the purpose of collaborating on Kingdom-focused vision for revitalization efforts in the local community would give glimpses of the Kingdom of God to the city and lead to healing between the two congregations.

There is another, and more theologically significant, reality for Hillside Presbyterian Church. Many members of the Hillside congregation have now spent their entire lives hoping their declining town would come back to life. They have prayed for a return of the industries that once made the town great, but what they observe is that the town has continued to experience decline by almost every measurable metric, including physical deterioration, fewer employment opportunities, and a shrinking tax base, which has led the borough to be classified as what Pennsylvania calls an Act 47 – Financially Distressed Municipality. Consequently, many seem reluctant to believe in the possibility or reality of resurrection. They genuinely believe in the Resurrection as an abstract concept central to their Christian faith, but their lifelong experience tells them that a dying town does not come back to life. The work of a proposed joint task force that would focus on revitalization of the town and might also address the core belief in the Resurrection, and what even a glimpse of the new life offered in Christ might mean to those who desperately need to witness it.

The eschatological implications of the Kingdom coming to earth seem especially important in an economically distressed community. The belief that Christ is going to return and restore all that is broken gives the people of God a vision of what their community will one day be again. Consequently, a clearer and more confident understanding of God's Kingdom will, I believe, help those

who would participate in this joint community mission task force see that Greenville's promised future is much brighter than its vaunted past.

The Setting

The city of Greenville, Pennsylvania is a steel-industry town that saw growth every decade for a hundred years until it peaked about 60 years ago with a population of 9,200. Several factors, including the closing of the steel mills and metal manufacturing, caused the city to decline every decade since, to what is now a population of approximately 5,800,² roughly 60 percent of what it once was.

In its prime, the town was a magnet for manufacturing plants because it was a place where the state roads, canals, and railroads between Pittsburgh, Erie, and Cleveland converged. The industries that sprung up provided lucrative employment for everyone from laborers to business owners. Like many other communities in western Pennsylvania, the manufacturing jobs have largely left the area, but a "rust belt" mentality, which yearns for the return of industry, has now permeated the thinking of the people of Greenville. Decades of decline have left deep psychological and emotional scars and have created a crumbling infrastructure: pockmarked streets, overgrown landscaping, and deteriorating buildings all contribute to a mindset of defeat and hopelessness. This mindset is what I hope to address in this thesis-project.

² United States Census Bureau, "QuickFacts," *United States Census Bureau*, Accessed June 14, 2016, <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/EDU685214/4231328,42>.

People in Greenville are finally starting to come to terms with the reality that the industries they once knew may never return and the town will never be “like it once was,” but this leads many people to the belief that the town has no hope of improvement or recovery. Sadly, many people choose to self-medicate their sense of hopelessness by turning to escapes such as drugs and alcohol. Local officials have acknowledged the problem saying that there is “no doubt that heroin is tearing through Mercer County.”³

Also like most communities in western Pennsylvania, two Presbyterian congregations have existed in parallel isolation for over a century. Although both congregations were part of the same denomination for nearly 75 years, they have a relationship somewhat characterized by antipathy. Hillside Presbyterian remains a part of the Presbyterian Church (USA) whereas First Presbyterian has recently left the denomination to become a part of the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO). The congregations have rarely, if ever, worked together, yet the recent change in denomination seems to have reduced, rather than heightened, the sense of competition between the two.

Definition of the Project

This thesis-project revolves around the formation of a joint mission task force with First Presbyterian Church for the purpose of collaborating on the creation of community revitalization efforts with Kingdom-focused vision. Through

³ Sandy Scarmack, “Forum explores how addiction is taking its toll locally,” *Sharon Herald* (Sharon, PA), May 27, 2016.

this process, the hope is to offer glimpses of the potential of the Kingdom of God for the city, and nurture spiritual growth for those involved. Asking a congregation accustomed to only donating money and resources to change their strategy is challenging in itself, but in this thesis-project the expectation is that two groups that are not accustomed to collaboration would work together for the sake of those outside of their congregations.

In working together with the neighboring pastor, we selected a team of people from within the congregations who have significant history in and concern for the community, and will establish parameters under which a joint task force may function. The hope was that at least some of these team members might be committed to a theology of restoration and resurrection, gifted for the work of mission, and inclined toward inter-denominational cooperation.

Prior to beginning the work of this thesis-project, an entrance interview was designed and implemented for those who were chosen to be participants on this task force. Meeting with each person individually established a baseline for their attitudes and beliefs while cultivating a personal relationship and developing the level of trust and collegiality that would be necessary for the work to come.

The next plan was to lead the task force through a defined study of Kingdom-focused vision for their work as we looked at the Biblical and theological themes of creation, fall, redemption, and God's ultimate plan for the new creation. The goal of this study was to help the team understand and own a vision for what revitalization might look like in our community and what it might

mean for those people who would both participate in and witness the work done, as well as the work that God would do through us.

It seemed prudent for the task force to meet in a neutral location to nurture community-focused discussions and minimize the possibility of bias toward either congregation's independent efforts. Furthermore, the members of the two congregations were asked to sit intermingled so as to reinforce the idea that we were doing something greater than either congregation or even the sum of the two parts.

The research portion of this thesis-project utilized a semi-structured exit interview to solicit feedback from those involved in this process. Rather than asking them questions to gather quantitative data, the goal was to gain a qualitative understanding of how the work of the task force affected their previous mindset and assumptions. Participants would be interviewed prior to their first meeting with one another and towards the end in order to observe any changes in their attitude or understanding.

Relevant Research

The perceived reality that Greenville is in decline looms large in the psyche of those who live here. In many ways, the mindset of the town permeates the thinking of those within the congregations. Understanding the sociological forces at play within the town will not only help us understand the context in which this thesis-project will take place but the challenges present within the congregations as well.

Small Town Life

Before beginning research and experimentation in the community, research that has been done on similar communities and that could help the task force better understand the context of the Greenville area needed to be done. The decline of the community seems to contribute heavily into the psyche of the people who live here. Some researchers have characterized places like Greenville as a “Smallville.”⁴ Although many characteristics of Greenville might be considered quaint, being a small town invariably carries with it many challenges: “Rich social resources will not make Smallville grow, however, because the features associated with growth—location, ambiance, size, or a diverse economy—are absent.”⁵

Many local residents complain that the only employment available in the Greenville area are entry-level jobs with no opportunity for substantive advancement. Sociologist Sonya Salamon finds that this is a common problem for many small towns: “A central dilemma for Smallville is that people love the community, but it is difficult to earn a living there or nearby.”⁶ This means that people in the middle of their careers are forced to look elsewhere for employment capable of sustaining their families. Census data supports this theory, showing

⁴ Sonya Salamon, “From Hometown to Nontown: Rural Community Effects of Suburbanization,” *Rural Sociology* 68, no. 1 (March 2003): 8. Salamon’s description of Smallville-type towns matches Greenville nearly perfectly: “Such towns have sustained a consistent set of demographic and economic traits since World War II: a population dwindling and aging in place; declining or stagnant home values; and a deteriorating local economy due to farm concentration and loss of local businesses and services.”

⁵ Salamon, “From Hometown to Nontown,” 10.

⁶ Salamon, “From Hometown to Nontown,” 9.

that Greenville has a significantly lower percentage of its population between the ages of 25 and 50 than the rest of Pennsylvania or the United States at large.⁷

Migration

The population data for Greenville is consistent with findings of other researchers who have studied rural migration and economic patterns. What is often observed in Greenville is that the jobs are simply not there, especially for blue-collar workers; as Patrick McCormick writes, “The last half century has seen a steady decline in many of America’s cities as manufacturing jobs moved from the Rust Belt to the Sun Belt and beyond, and urban blight spread through working-class neighborhoods.”⁸ Compounding this problem is the tendency of rural communities to attract poorer people from larger cities because of the lower cost of living: “Nonmetro [*sic*] Pennsylvania counties have been attracting poor from the urban areas and the less educated, while losing those with college educations.”⁹

Unfortunately, once this process begins, it seems to be self-reinforcing because the more unemployment an area has, the more likely they are to attract the less educated, which will likely lead to more unemployment. A study by Jason P. Schachter, Leif Jensen, and Gretchen T. Cornwell has found that “areas with

⁷ United States Census Bureau, “Factfinder,” *United States Census Bureau*. Accessed June 14, 2016. <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>. For a graphic depiction of this data, see figure 1 in Appendix A.

⁸ Patrick McCormick, “There are no children here,” *U.S. Catholic* 70, No 10 (October 2005): 47.

⁹ Jason P. Schachter, Leif Jensen, and Gretchen T. Cornwell, “Migration, Residential Mobility, and Poverty in Rural Pennsylvania,” *Rural Development Perspectives* 13, no. 2 (Aug 1998): 40.

higher unemployment are more likely to gain a disproportionate percentage of least educated poor in their migration streams.”¹⁰ This puts increasing strain on the local economy because the tax base has more people drawing upon local resources and fewer people contributing from a median income level: “The prospect that the urban poor are seeking refuge in depressed rural communities does not brighten the future of places that may already be struggling with fiscal strain and dwindling resources.”¹¹

The fewer skilled workers that a community has, the less chance it has of developing employment opportunities for skilled workers: “This loss of human capital is a disadvantage to nonmetro [*sic*] counties, in that there are fewer skilled workers to attract more profitable industries, which reduces the potential for local development.”¹²

Another problem is that newcomers to the community often have different values and priorities for the community than the “oldtimers” who value the town’s heritage and identity.¹³ Not only does the influx of the less-educated poor hinder the potential for a small town’s economic recovery, but it also damages the town’s character as well. Salamon elaborates, “This fundamental transformation of rural society is altering basic tenets taken for granted about communities with

¹⁰ Schachter, Jensen, and Cornwell, “Migration,” 41.

¹¹ Schachter, Jensen, and Cornwell, “Migration,” 44.

¹² Schachter, Jensen, and Cornwell, “Migration,” 45.

¹³ Salamon, “From Hometown to Nontown,” 11.

agrarian roots: shared values, density of connections, effective norms, and engagement and mobilization for the common good.”¹⁴

Economics and Education

Studies also show that small towns are losing their college-educated citizens. This is true in Greenville. Although the percentage of persons over the age of 25 who have a bachelor’s degree or higher in the state of Pennsylvania is 28.1%, that number within the Borough of Greenville is 17.6%¹⁵ and falls to 12.5% when factoring in the surrounding zip code. The number of residents in the area with a high school diploma is also 10% lower than the statewide average.¹⁶

Some research has been done to explore how the loss of industry and educated workers shocks a community’s system. While some cities experience the large and immediate shock of a natural disaster, they “are also impacted by ‘slow motion shocks’ that are changes manifesting over a period of years or even decades, which impact the status quo of communities.”¹⁷ In some ways, the effects of change is magnified in a small town because the consequence of

¹⁴ Salamon, “From Hometown to Nontown,” 12.

¹⁵ United States Census Bureau, “QuickFacts.” *United States Census Bureau*, Accessed June 14, 2016, <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/EDU685214/4231328,42>.

¹⁶ United States Census Bureau, “Factfinder.”

¹⁷ Terry L. Besser, Nicholas Recker and Kerry Agntsch, “The Impact of Economic Shocks on Quality of Life and Social Capital in Small Towns,” *Rural Sociology* 73, no. 4 (2008): 580.

events such as businesses closing are felt much more profoundly than they would be in a larger metropolitan area.¹⁸

Although economic and population decline occurs slowly over several decades, there is “a cumulative effect equivalent to or even more devastating to community welfare than one dramatic event.”¹⁹ Most people in Greenville seem to believe that only a major economic event such as the opening of a significant manufacturing plant can possibly reverse the town’s decline.

However, a major piece of good news that gives hope to the work of this thesis-project is the research that small victories have the potential to make a difference in the life of the town: “the notions that shocks are cumulative indicates that the damage to subjective quality of life and social capital resulting from a negative shock can be neutralized with an equivalent positive shock or a series of small positive shocks.”²⁰ Such findings give credence to the notion that even small glimpses of hope found in God’s Kingdom can and do make a meaningful difference in a town like Greenville.

Community Involvement

In addition to the realities outlined above, fewer working people between the age of 25 and 50 means fewer family units in the community: “Families are grounded in and committed to cities in ways that young singles or retirees are

¹⁸ Besser, Recker and Agntsch, “The Impact of Economic Shocks,” 580.

¹⁹ Besser, Recker and Agntsch, “The Impact of Economic Shocks,” 600.

²⁰ Besser, Recker and Agntsch, “The Impact of Economic Shocks,” 602.

not. People who are raising their children and grandchildren in a neighborhood have a greater stake in its future and more reason to get involved in local programs and politics.”²¹ Many of the young families that do live in Greenville are poor and have immigrated to the area in search of a lower cost of living. Even though families generally want to have a nice place in which their children may grow, newcomers often fail to understand “the volunteerism and shared values that laboriously created these social goods and resources.”²² Without having the same roots as those who have lived in a community longer, underemployed newcomers often have lower levels of integration into the city and therefore experience greater levels of fear and animosity toward the community in which they live.²³

Fear and a “Scarcity” Mindset

The mindset of fear and hopelessness prevalent in Greenville is precisely what I hope to address in this thesis-project. Roughly 40 percent of the city’s downtown storefronts sit vacant. People notice, and it absolutely plays into their perceptions of the town: “research demonstrates that neighborhood disorder (‘incivilities’ such as abandoned storefronts, graffiti, and unkept [*sic*] lots) influences the fear of crime insofar as these factors indicate weakening of

²¹ McCormick, “There are no children here,” 48.

²² Salamon, “From Hometown to Nontown,” 13.

²³ Lori M. Hunter, Richard S. Krannich and Michael D. Smith, “Rural Migration, Rapid Growth, and Fear of Crime,” *Rural Sociology* 67, no. 1, (2002): 75.

traditional norms and local social control.”²⁴ While external factors such as abandoned storefronts and cracked streets certainly influence how people perceive their community, “there is evidence that an individual’s concerns and fears about neighborhood activity and disorder will have more influence on their fear of crime than the crime statistics or police reports for the neighborhood.”²⁵

While it may seem obvious that a crumbling infrastructure and deteriorating neighborhood would lead to a greater fear of crime, what is not immediately obvious is the long-term psychological impact that such conditions can have on the people who live with them. Not surprisingly, “perceived neighborhood stressors (dissatisfaction, lack of safety, instability, poverty, social disengagement, and lack of social support) will be associated with worse emotional well-being (higher levels of depressed affect, hopelessness, and anger).”²⁶ Particularly speaking, the research demonstrates a strong link between hopelessness and neighborhood poverty.²⁷ The more poor people are attracted to the community, the higher the poverty rate, and the greater the sense of hopelessness. This cycle will also perpetuate itself unless an outside force intervenes to break it.

²⁴ Hunter, Krannich and Smith, “Rural Migration, Rapid Growth, and Fear of Crime,” 74.

²⁵ Karen A. Snedker and Carole Hooven, “Neighborhood Perceptions and Emotional Well-Being in Young Adulthood,” *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing* 26, no. 1 (February 2013): 63.

²⁶ Snedker and Hooven, “Neighborhood Perceptions,” 64-65.

²⁷ Snedker and Hooven, “Neighborhood Perceptions,” 68.

The worse the conditions in the community become, the stronger the occurrences of anger, hopelessness, and depression.²⁸ The good news for this thesis-project is that the tie between the community and emotional health flows in both directions. Although crumbling neighborhood conditions and poverty lead to hopelessness, community engagement and support lead to feelings of hope: “we now have further evidence that the perception that such [social] support is available in the neighborhood also influences well-being. . . . It could be that promoting more neighborhood socializing and connections represents a new avenue of intervention for young adults.”²⁹

Instead of using what resources they have to help revitalize the dying town, most people, and thus most congregations, are operating from a mindset of scarcity. Since the town is losing resources, people are inclined to hold tightly to the resources that they have. This means that fewer and fewer resources are invested for the welfare of the town, leading the town to decline even faster. The faster the town declines, the fewer resources are available, and the more people operate from a scarcity mentality. So the cycle reinforces itself.

Much of the evidence surrounding the decline of small towns is indeed intimidating, but there is also enough evidence to support the hypothesis that a group of people working together to make a difference in their community have the potential to do just that. If secular studies conclude that it is possible to stem the tide of hopelessness by community involvement alone, how much more can

²⁸ Snedker and Hooven, “Neighborhood Perceptions,” 69.

²⁹ Snedker and Hooven, “Neighborhood Perceptions,” 69.

two communities of faith partnering together in the name of Jesus bring hope to their neighbors in need?

Empirical Unknowns and Project Aims

The hope was, at the very least, this thesis-project would lead to a new level of trust and cooperation between members of the two Presbyterian congregations in Greenville, Pennsylvania. If nothing else, I believed members of both congregations could come to the realization that many opportunities exist for joint witness: the community would benefit from the two congregations cooperating rather than avoiding one another.

A greater hope of this thesis-project was that the witness of two congregations setting aside what was best for them for the sake of their community would bear witness to the reality of God's reign on earth. Even a glimpse of the power of the resurrection and the glory of God's Kingdom has the potential to give people an enduring hope that will challenge them to rise above their surroundings. I also hoped people would be transformed and grow in personal spiritual maturity as they began to work together for the glory of God and the benefit of their neighbors.

Perhaps the greatest empirical unknown that must be recognized from the outset is the subjective nature of evaluating any potential impact that this thesis-project may have on levels of hopelessness in the community. The time and resources that would be necessary to gauge the collective mental state of the town as a whole are beyond the scope of this thesis-project. Although it is

certainly to be hoped that the cooperative work of the two congregations will make a difference to those whose lives are touched by it, the focus of this thesis-project will be on the transformation of the congregations in general and the increased cooperation and spiritual growth of those involved in particular. Even then, trying to measure the extent to which this thesis-project will change the hearts and minds of those who participate is by its very nature a subjective exercise. This thesis-project seeks to make a qualitative impact and will therefore be difficult to quantify with any accuracy.

Another variable that must be considered had to do with the preconceived notions that members of each congregation had of one another. Although the economic disparities that once typified the divide between the two groups in Greenville's prime have been largely, if not entirely, eroded by economic decline, the strained relationships remain. The unknown was whether the work of the Kingdom would be important enough for those who have volunteered to participate in this joint task force to overcome their historic differences.

Ultimately, this thesis-project hoped to broaden the thinking and deepen the theological vision of those on the task force and those who work alongside it. Although the joint mission team would serve as the nerve center for the cooperative work between the two congregations, the work that is done in the community would hopefully require the recruitment of additional volunteers from within both congregations and without. The thesis-project explores how participating in Kingdom work in the community can change the mentality of those who, by default, typically deal with "castle"-type work within their respective

congregations. Theoretically, the more that Kingdom vision and Kingdom theology permeate the thinking of the congregations, the greater the likelihood of congregational transformation.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

“Hear the call of the Kingdom, / lift your eyes to the King, /
Let His song rise within you as a fragrant offering, /
Of how God, rich in mercy, / came in Christ to redeem. . .”
— Keith Getty and Stuart Townend

In Scripture we are told that “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near.’”¹ Jesus’ opening words in the earliest canonical gospel set the tone for his ministry on Earth: God’s rule and salvation has come to Earth. The concept was such an important aspect of his ministry that he mentions God’s Kingdom no less than 112 times in the Gospels. Jesus warns his disciples, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. . . . Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.”² Before it can build on a firm foundation by doing the will of the Father, a local congregation must first know what the will of the Father is. Having a proper biblical and theological groundwork is indispensable for the local church if it ever hopes to be able to create a pocket of God’s Kingdom.

The sobering part of Jesus’ warning that not all who cry “Lord” will enter the Kingdom is that he suggests there are people who genuinely believe they are serving Jesus when he makes it clear they are not. In studying the passage

¹ Mark 1:15. All Scripture references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

² Matthew 7:21, 24.

above, “We learn at least that it is possible to work *for* Jesus and yet not live *under* him. . . . It is strangely possible to serve and even to glorify Christ and yet in one’s own personal life not to obey him.”³ Such a revelation should highly motivate disciples to make sure that they understand exactly what it means to be in relationship with Jesus. If members of the local congregation do not spend time understanding who God is, how can they expect to build for the Kingdom without blueprints?

Another call to study the nature of God’s Kingdom more closely comes from Darrell Guder, who asserts that “Perhaps no major theme in the biblical testimony has been as distorted or neglected in the course of Christendom than has been this central emphasis on the Kingdom of God.”⁴ N.T. Wright elaborates on just how central the concept of the Kingdom once was to the church:

The early Christians spoke of the Kingdom quite frequently, and apparently with an assumed reference. Kingdom-language seems to have functioned as a kind of shorthand summary for the preaching and apologetic message of the church, or indeed for the whole of what Christianity was about. To this extent, it almost functions like ‘the Way’ in Acts: it was a means whereby Christians could identify themselves and their very *raison d’être*.⁵

The implications of God’s Kingdom for transformative ministry in the contemporary church are as relevant today as they have ever been, and this subject is one that demands the attention of anyone hoping to make a difference in the world for the sake of the gospel.

³ Dale Frederick Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol. 1, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 357.

⁴ Darrell L. Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World* (Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 2007), 3.

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 215.

“Kingdom” Defined by God’s Sovereign Reign

The Kingdom of God, by definition, must have a “king.” Mark Labberton writes, “The Kingdom of God is not a utopian vision, a dream with no hope of reality, but the assured and coming reign of Christ that will establish a new heaven and a new earth.”⁶ The Kingdom is at once invisible and tangible. It is something that already exists and is immeasurably incomplete: “the Kingdom is a place of right relationship. . . a state of being into which God is drawing us right here and now, in our world, as well as a promise of the perfection God will fulfill in the new creation.”⁷

Because God is “king,” that title, by definition, means that those who follow God are subject to his will. Thus the sovereignty of God is the starting place for what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ and take part in the work of the Kingdom. Those who seek to delve deeper into the mysteries of the Kingdom remember that “this phrase, Jesus Christ is Lord, is the church’s oldest confession of faith and its most comprehensive affirmation. It is the central content of the church’s ‘exhibition of the Kingdom of heaven to the world.’”⁸ Both the reality that God is God and the confession that Jesus is Lord remind us of the reality of God’s reign, but the character of God defines the nature of that reign: “Whenever and however, then, that the ‘Kingdom of heaven’ or the ‘reign of God’ is spoken of in the Bible, the reader should always remember that this rule is

⁶ Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God’s Call to Justice* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 183.

⁷ Debra Rienstra and Ron Rienstra, *Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 126.

⁸ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 26.

rooted in love, expressed in power and purposefulness, and displayed in the goodness of all that is.”⁹

In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Joel Marcus asserts that, properly understood, the Kingdom of God “is not so much the *place* where God rules as the *fact* that he rules or the *power* by which he manifests his sovereignty.”¹⁰ As such, Jesus’ teachings are largely about what God’s rule should look like in the life of his disciples. Likewise, his miracles are not departures from the natural world but rather glimpses of the natural world as it should be under God’s sovereign rule. Consequently, disciples of Jesus need to imagine what it might look like for God to reign over their community, then seek out and employ opportunities they find to give people glimpses of that reality.

Ultimately, the Kingdom is about acknowledging God for who he is as King and responding accordingly to help his sovereign will be done. That is not to say that the Kingdom is in any way dependent upon its subjects. On the contrary, “At the end of the day, however, God’s Kingdom does not fall and rise according to the demographics of a given generation.”¹¹ This is one of the reasons that worship is so important to God’s subjects; in it, disciples ascribe ultimate worth to their King and reframe their lives with proper perspective and in proper relationship to him. While Sabbath rest may “not seem like it is doing anything,” it is actually “remembering and practicing what is most important: trusting God to

⁹ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 12.

¹⁰ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 172.

¹¹ Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 230.

be God over all.”¹² If worship is in any way transformative, it must re-enforce the relationship of worshipers to the Lord who is King. The Church desperately needs worship and theology to help “us understand our experience of God and relate to God more adequately.”

Since the Kingdom of God is synonymous with the sovereign reign of God, the local church creates what I like to call “pockets of the Kingdom” when it ascribes all glory to him in worship. God blesses his people so they can be a blessing to others. God also redeems his people so they can experience a right and worshipful relationship with him. In Exodus 3, God demands that Pharaoh let his people go “that they might worship.” Central to their liberation from slavery is the possibility “that this priestly people might freely serve God together, might worship without snares or obstacles. Worship, then, is intimately linked with freedom.”¹³ In that vein, everything a congregation does to create pockets of God’s Kingdom is ultimately about glorifying him. Edith Humphrey goes so far as to say, “I will not argue but merely state, as a foundation, my presupposition that worship is *the* major purpose, and action of the Church.”¹⁴ If a local congregation is not giving glory and honor to God in worship, it is not participating in God’s Kingdom or his mission to the world.

Yet people seem reluctant to have an encounter with God and for good reason: “Nothing is as dangerous as encountering the true and living God. . .

¹² Labberton, *Dangerous Act*, 99.

¹³ Edith Humphrey, *Grand Entrance: Worship on Earth as in Heaven* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 9.

¹⁴ Humphrey, *Grand Entrance*, 3.

because meeting God redefines everything that we call normal and commands us to seek first his Kingdom.”¹⁵ More than being a shared ritual, the whole act of worship is “meant to shape our vision and fire our engines to be daring disciples, imitating and sharing the love of Jesus Christ. . . .”¹⁶ Believers first begin to enter into God’s Kingdom when they acknowledge his sovereign reign in their lives. Anyone who hopes to work for the sake of the Kingdom of God must be connected to and sent from a worshipping community. As such, it was crucial for this thesis-project that the key participants were drawn from active congregations.

Being so close to God in worship, however, reminds us of God’s mission to the world: “Worship is responding to God’s own invitation, that we should see more and more clearly who God is . . . and [entering] more deeply into his communion with us and his care for the world.”¹⁷ The same was true for the apostle Paul in the book of Acts: “It was in the context of worship, prayer and fasting that the church at Antioch was led by the Holy Spirit to initiate the first intentionally centrifugal Gentile mission.”¹⁸ Mission draws disciples into worship, and true worship propels disciples into mission. Such worship also empowers the work of the church: “When the church is seen to move straight from worship of

¹⁵ Labberton, *Dangerous Act*, 63.

¹⁶ Labberton, *Dangerous Act*, 22.

¹⁷ Humphrey, *Grand Entrance*, 17.

¹⁸ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 258. Wright is referring to Acts 13:2-3; “While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”

the God we see in Jesus to making a difference and effecting much-needed change in the real world. . . when the church is living out the Kingdom of God, the word of God will spread powerfully and do its own work.”¹⁹

In regular, everyday acts of sacrifice and devotion, a local congregation demonstrates to the world what it means to live under God’s sovereign rule: “The church in offering up the firstfruits of creation *becomes* the firstfruits of the new creation and shows what God intends for the world to become.”²⁰ Telling people about God is one thing; showing them is something else entirely. That is what working to create pockets of the Kingdom on earth is all about because “As in any act of worship, actions are often more important than words.”²¹

This thesis-project has no hope of building an outpost of God’s Kingdom if the disciples who participate are not grounded in God’s sovereignty, yet the implications of the reign of God form the backdrop for the entire undertaking. At the heart of this thesis-project is the fundamental understanding that the Borough of Greenville, PA, the context of this thesis-project, is a place in which God’s Kingdom is not readily visible. The myriad challenges facing the region as outlined in the first chapter seem to stand in stark contrast the what life looks like in places where God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven, so this thesis-project hoped to exhibit God’s Kingdom by giving the people of Greenville a glimpse of what life might look like were a more clearly defined pocket of God’s

¹⁹ Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 267.

²⁰ Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 84.

²¹ William H Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 110.

Kingdom to manifest itself in their midst. The rest of this chapter will explore the Biblical and theological elements that must be present for that goal to be reached.

Incarnation

While the Kingdom is, by nature, about the sovereign reign of God, it manifests itself in the world through the person of Jesus Christ: “The God who is ‘King of heaven’ does not withdraw inside heaven, but engages his creation and gets involved in its story.”²² Howard Snyder observes that “*Jesus Christ is the decisive inbreaking of the Kingdom into human history. . . . In Jesus’ life, teachings, healings, and especially in his death and resurrection the power of the Kingdom has been decisively demonstrated.*”²³ It is in the person of Jesus Christ that disciples see and experience the Kingdom most clearly and fully. Furthermore, the Church has always understood that “to the same degree that the Kingdom has been inaugurated in Jesus, the Kingdom can be realized among us.”²⁴ To put it another way, “The exhibition of the Kingdom of heaven to the world is the announcement and practice of the in-breaking reign of God now taking place in the lordship of Jesus Christ.”²⁵ If the Kingdom of God is going to

²² Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 10.

²³ Howard A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom: Gospel, Culture, and Mission in Biblical and Historical Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001) 147. Emphasis not added.

²⁴ Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2014), 39.

²⁵ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 27.

have any impact on the city of Greenville, PA, it must be manifested in a very incarnational and tangible sense.

Just as Jesus announced and demonstrated God's Kingdom through his life on earth, so the Church announces and demonstrates God's Kingdom by its service to and testimony of Jesus Christ. Disciples demonstrate God's Kingdom in their changed lives: "It is in following Jesus that the reign of God becomes visible."²⁶ Jesus commands his disciples to carry on his work of making the Kingdom accessible to those who need it most: "The call to 'believe in the gospel', or to 'believe in me'. . . evokes the historical picture of one who believed that, with his [Jesus'] work, Israel's god was inaugurating his long-awaited Kingdom."²⁷ As God came into history in a meaningful way through Jesus Christ, the Church has the same purpose: "the incarnation of Jesus Christ defines the way that congregations are formed for 'the exhibition of the Kingdom of heaven to the world.'"²⁸

However the people of a local congregation seek to create pockets of God's Kingdom on earth, they must do so in ways that are appropriate and comprehensible to their local community. The work of the people in a congregation is never simply to build outposts of God's Kingdom in order to make their world a better place for them to live. They are called to this ministry for the sake of a world in need. From the very beginning, God called his people out to be

²⁶ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 28.

²⁷ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 263.

²⁸ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 47.

a blessing to those around them. When God called Abram, he said, “I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”²⁹ In the same way, when the resurrected Christ spoke to his disciples, he promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit at the same time he gave them their mission: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”³⁰ Part of life in God’s Kingdom means accepting the responsibility to spread the Kingdom to others in an incarnational way.

The mission of the Church includes living the worship of God by intertwining everyday life with the holy. John Witvliet has written that “spirituality blurs the lines between liturgy and life.”³¹ Wright places slightly different emphasis on the same point when he advocates for Christians to take up the cause of spreading beauty throughout the world: “our creating of beauty, our praying and working for justice and peace in the world, are not simply us doing something for God; they are God acting in and through us.”³² Or, as Simon Chan writes, “The goal is that through the mission of the church the world will be transformed into the body of Christ.”³³

A group of people are formed as the body of Christ when they gather for worship. It is through an encounter with Christ that the Kingdom first begins to

²⁹ Genesis 12:2-3.

³⁰ John 20:21.

³¹ Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 229.

³² N.T. Wright, *For All God’s Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 31.

³³ Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 143.

take form in the world: “The Kingdom does not come with bells and whistles, with visibility—except through the preached Word, Sacraments, officers, and the gathered saints in general.”³⁴ Scot McKnight elaborates: “To be sure, a Biblical approach to Kingdom mission listens first and foremost to Scripture in order to be formed by the gospel story, but, once formed, the Kingdom citizen explores what Kingdom means in our world in specific locations.”³⁵ The Kingdom of God absolutely exists as a spiritual reality, but it invariably breaks into the lives of everyday people as disciples continue the work of Jesus Christ in the world around them. Congregations “mimic the incarnation when we enter into the conditions of others in order to mediate redemption so that they can enter into the conditions of the Kingdom.”³⁶

Too often, Christians recognize the spiritual power of the Kingdom to transform their hearts, but that is where they leave things. Ron Reinstra offers a cautionary point: “Protestants especially have a tendency to consider words and thoughts more spiritual than the body and physical things. But this is a disincarnational attitude.”³⁷ Christians are formed as we encounter God, and God is at work in the world furthering his Kingdom to the furthest reaches of the globe. There can be a disconnect between the person of Jesus and a congregation’s actions as Jane Vann discovered: “A source of fruitful reflection. . . centers

³⁴ Horton, *A Better Way*, 133.

³⁵ McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 54. McKnight is summarizing some of the core concepts found on pages 115-142 of N.T. Wright’s *Scripture and the Authority of God*.

³⁶ McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 138.

³⁷ Reinstra, *Worship Words*, 234.

around questions of continuity and discontinuity in the worship and life of the congregation.”³⁸ If the outcome of this thesis-project had hopes of being incarnational in any way, then our actions needed to flow organically from our beliefs: “By linking proclamation and exhibition, we challenge the pernicious tendency to separate word from act.”³⁹

Many disciples, it would seem, allow their minds and their perceptions to be transformed but not their actions. James Smith articulates, “we have too often pursued flawed models of discipleship and Christian formation that have focused on convincing the intellect rather than recruiting the imagination.”⁴⁰ But the human experience is so much broader and richer than that of the mind alone: “Thus learning is not confined to the acquisition of information or the accumulation of knowledge but includes all aspects of human engagement with the world.”⁴¹ If the members of a congregation are to take their spiritual inheritance seriously, then they must embrace the call to a life of discipleship: “To know the gospel story—to learn it, to be shaped by it—is not merely to hear and assent to it but to embody it, to give it living, material form and substance.”⁴² The more people within the congregation start to live and act as disciples, the more they will understand their congregation within the Kingdom as a countercultural

³⁸ Jane Rogers Vann, *Gathered Before God: Worship-Centered Church Renewal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 29.

³⁹ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 37.

⁴⁰ James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 39.

⁴¹ Vann, *Gathered Before God*, 52.

⁴² Debra Dean Murphey, *Teaching That Transforms: Worship as the Heart of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 108.

“reality and set of values to be lived out now, in the present order, in radical obedience to the gospel and in opposition to the powers of the present age.”⁴³ As the people of a congregation live these values, they become the body of Christ in the world in a highly incarnational and tangible way.

The majority of people in Greenville, PA, do not attend any form of Christian worship with meaningful regularity. If the gospel is going to take hold of their lives, it is almost certainly going to happen through the work of local congregations making the Kingdom real to them outside of a church building. This thesis-project sought to make this happen by asking the participating congregations to embrace their calling to be the body of Christ in the community.

Messianic Salvation: Healing What is Broken

Jesus undoubtedly drew crowds in part because he was making their lives better. The sick were healed and the hungry were fed, yet Jesus even observed that most of the crowds missed the greater significance of what he was doing.⁴⁴ Yet many people came precisely because they were longing for something deeper. People seem to sense at a primal level that the world is not as it should be, and they desperately want, even if only subconsciously, for God to set things right. This was especially the case during Jesus’ day when the promise God had given through the prophets had been so clearly promulgated throughout all of Israel. As Hugh Halter and Matt Smay write, “It was the gospel that Jesus knew

⁴³ Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 77.

⁴⁴ John 6:26ff.

would draw people naturally like sheep to a clear-water well. It was good news! Always, in all times, with any person, for one major reason we've lost sight of: the gospel meant that life *now* could be different!"⁴⁵

The Messianic promise is that God's chosen one is going to come and put to death evil, injustice, and all that is broken so that things may be set right. Christians have always understood that the old self has to die in order for the new self to thrive, but that same thinking must be carried over to the organizational level in a congregation. Spiritually speaking, the work of transformation is fully in line with the Christian walk: "If we are willing to die to our comfort and personal preferences, and faithfully plant ourselves incarnationally among the people groups and neighborhoods God sends us to, fruit will abound."⁴⁶

For those who have come to faith in Jesus, the sin that is removed is replaced with an identity that connects disciples to the story of God: The "shaping of our character is, to a great extent, the effect of stories that have captivated us, that have sunk into our bones."⁴⁷ The Christian character that develops comes in response to disciples being formed as disciples: an "encounter with God includes seeing ourselves and the world from God's perspective."⁴⁸ Such self-awareness is a necessary part of seeing God's Kingdom at work in the world where others

⁴⁵ Hugh Halter & Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 88.

⁴⁶ JR Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), 51.

⁴⁷ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 32.

⁴⁸ Vann, *Gathered Before God*, 24

only see chaos. When worship is truly authentic, “we discover not only the ‘pearl of great price’ but also who we really are.”⁴⁹ Rather than affirming people where they are “We urgently need to recover a comprehensive vision for worship that recontextualizes our entire life and leads us to live out the worship God intends and desires.”⁵⁰ When it is done right, that is exactly what worship does: “part of what worship forms in us is a new perspective on life in all its dimensions.”⁵¹ Our very heart and soul are transformed.

Once Christians have been transformed to the point where they can see the world in light of God’s agenda to bring healing to the world, they long to see God’s Kingdom flourish in the world because of the good they know it will do: “The Christian attitude toward culture is that of conversion. Culture itself is and should be constantly ‘converting’ more fully according to the gospel in order to more fully embody the reign of God.”⁵² N.T. Wright expands this line of thinking when he says, “The church is here to be the Voice to the world . . . to demonstrate and announce that there is a different way of being human. . . .”⁵³ In this way, the Kingdom of God encroaches on death and chaos and calls them to account: “This faith refuses to accept that violence, greed, and pride are

⁴⁹ Humphrey, *Grand Entrance*, 168.

⁵⁰ Labberton, *Dangerous Act*, 40.

⁵¹ John D. Witvliet, “The Cumulative Power of Transformation in Public Worship,” in *Worship That Changes Lives*, edited by Alexis D. Abernethy (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2008), 49.

⁵² Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 102.

⁵³ Wright, *For All God’s Worth*, 49-50.

unassailable and unchallengeable.”⁵⁴ The Kingdom should be one of the primary lenses through which Christians should view and interact with the culture.

As stated in the first chapter, Barna has observed that when people in a community fail to see a congregation engaged in the community ministry, it often leads them, especially if they are young, to turn away from the church as inauthentic. When some congregations seem to be at work making a difference in a community but are only doing so to recruit members and meet their budget, the people to whom they are ministering can see that as well: “The real essence of biblical blessing is that it’s done with *no strings attached*.”⁵⁵ In response to this kind of “outreach,” John Witvliet observes, “If our gospel is what people think it is, it’s no wonder that it’s not worth adding church to a busy recreational weekend.”⁵⁶

Jesus specifically criticized the “religious” for defining and setting themselves against the very people to whom God had sent them: Jesus was “criticizing his contemporaries for being more concerned for victory over the gentile world than for bringing YHWH’s healing and salvation to it.”⁵⁷ The ministry to which Jesus calls his disciples brings nothing short of life-altering transformation: “*Jesus was offering the return from exile, the renewed covenant, the eschatological ‘forgiveness of sins’* – in other words, the Kingdom of God. And he was offering this final eschatological blessing outside the official

⁵⁴ Wright, *For All God’s Worth*, 55.

⁵⁵ Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 143.

⁵⁶ Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 88.

⁵⁷ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 309. Emphasis not added.

structures, to all the wrong people, and on his own authority. That was his real offence.”⁵⁸ The whole drive of God’s Kingdom is an extension of who God is: “Now God’s goodness centers on the healing of this broken creation. This is what ‘salvation’ is all about. . . .”⁵⁹

Just as God’s actions flow from his character, so do a congregation’s actions flow from the new life that the people who form that congregation find in Christ. JR Woodward compares the inner-nature of the organization to the inner nature of a believer. Woodward argues that our actions are grounded in our identity, and “because missional leaders understand that doing proceeds from being, they help people understand who they are in Christ prior to what he has called them to do.”⁶⁰ Properly understanding the culture of the congregation is part of understanding the nature of the problem at hand: “too often, pastors and church leaders focus on the wrong issues: the grass rather than the soil.”⁶¹ Many of the presenting issues that call out for change are rooted in deeper, underlying assumptions held by a majority of those within the congregation: “The presuppositions that we hold, knowingly or unknowingly, as a community, are based on the primary narrative we live by.”⁶²

No amount of effort by congregational leaders will make a difference if God is not at work: “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor

⁵⁸ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 263.

⁵⁹ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 19.

⁶⁰ Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture*, 43.

⁶¹ Kevin Ford, *Transforming Church: Bringing Out the Good to Get the Great* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), 19.

⁶² Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture*, 37.

in vain.”⁶³ Conversely, “the only hope that transformation will happen is if God is truly in it.”⁶⁴ If there is any hope of meaningful change, Christians must take it for granted that God is going to change them in ways that he sees fit. In the midst of worship, disciples must be keenly aware that God is at work in amongst them: “To worship God in church or in the world, then, is to be involved in an activity that connects us to the working of the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁵ God is reconciling the disciples, and indeed the whole world, to himself through the power of the Holy Spirit: “The Christian gospel is a gospel of reconciliation, a concept enshrined in the heart of all worship.”⁶⁶

To be the Church of Jesus Christ is to take up the Messianic mantle to bring healing to a broken and hurting world. Disciples do not do this because they believe they have a God complex and believe they can personally save the world by their own actions. On the contrary, God is already at work saving the world through his Messiah. The Church is called to take part in that work because it is part of God’s Kingdom: “His Kingdom enters into warfare with the rebellious ‘powers and principalities’ as he takes the side of those who suffer, who are cast aside, who are hopeless within a world that rejects both God’s goodness and God’s purposes.”⁶⁷

⁶³ Psalm 127:1.

⁶⁴ Labberton, *Dangerous Act*, 128.

⁶⁵ Clayton J. Schmit, “Worship as a Locus for Transformation,” in *Worship That Changes Lives*, edited by Alexis D. Abernethy (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2008), 32.

⁶⁶ James Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1996), 89.

⁶⁷ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 31.

The implications of Messianic healing for the purposes of this thesis-project are clear. Greenville, PA, is a town that is hurting economically, spiritually, politically, and physically. While the problems of the town may be too great for even the combined efforts of two congregations to tackle alone, the hope for this thesis-project was that there would be at least one area in which the healing nature of the Kingdom of God could be brought to bear.

Resurrection

The healing and forgiveness Jesus brings cannot be overstated, yet if that is all that is stated then the story ends just before the climax. Too often, when disciples are transformed by their encounter with God, that is where their theology seems to end. N.T. Wright sounds the warning: “far too many Christians have been lulled into thinking that God isn’t really concerned with this world, so that the resurrection of Jesus isn’t about something happening in this world, so that the only thing that matters is my private other-worldly salvation.”⁶⁸

Wright explains the significance of biblical theology by likening it to “the carefully chosen frame that enables us to view the actual picture to best advantage.”⁶⁹ Without such a frame, it is easy to lose sight of the picture. Consequently, without the Resurrection, disciples view God through a frame that is only half constructed. Internalizing this theology and even using it as the basis

⁶⁸ Wright, *For All God’s Worth*, 67.

⁶⁹ Wright, *God’s Worth*, 40.

for prayer eventually “becomes the way you relate to God.”⁷⁰ Those who have holes in their theology have holes in their image of God, so they will undoubtedly find gaps in their life as disciples.

Rodney Stark writes that the early Church was a place of true disciples because what they had witnessed in Jesus of Nazareth was nothing short of God’s promises fulfilled before their eyes: “The obvious conclusion is that the Gospels are a quite reliable report of the Christ story *as it was believed and told* by the original eyewitnesses.”⁷¹ What was so surprising about Stark’s work is just how applicable it is for the Church’s present day struggles. Glimpsing the Resurrection reframes and changes the way in which disciples approach the world around them. Some of the earliest disciples witnessed the resurrected Christ, and others heard firsthand accounts. This changed their lives.

One could argue that the Resurrection was foreshadowed throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry. Indeed, his “welcome of the poor and outcast was a sign that the real return from exile, the new age, the ‘resurrection’, was coming into being”⁷² But these actions were just signposts to the game-changer that is the Resurrection: “The cross and the Resurrection redefine Kingdom in all directions . . . to say that the Kingdom has drawn near is to make a christological claim; it is to say the Kingdom is now present in Jesus.”⁷³ Through the

⁷⁰ Robin Parry, *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 120.

⁷¹ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 57.

⁷² Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 255.

⁷³ McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 35.

Resurrection, God was doing something that had never happened before. The cross gives God's people a clean slate, but it is the Resurrection that gives them new life as part of God's eternal Kingdom: "Jesus was inaugurating a way of life which had no further need of a Temple."⁷⁴

The Resurrection is crucially important to a place like Greenville, PA, where people have only witnessed year after year of decline throughout their entire adult lives. For most, the Resurrection is pipe dream while death is an ever-present reality.

Darrell Guder reminds us just how important new life is to the work of those trying to make God's Kingdom a reality: "The reign of God becomes our reality when we acknowledge our sin, submit to God's judgment, and receive instead of deserved punishment the gift of cleansing hope, and new life."⁷⁵

Interestingly, when I asked those who are participating in this thesis-project's task force to tell me about the Resurrection, every person talked about how Jesus died. Reclaiming a healthy doctrine of the Resurrection will be absolutely essential for the work of this thesis-project.

Missio Dei

In his book, *The Mission of God's People*, Christopher Wright uses the Bible itself to elaborate on God's revelation for the mission and purpose of the Church. Wright's fundamental assertion is that every Christian needs "to read the

⁷⁴ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 335.

⁷⁵ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 30.

whole Bible comprehensively to discern and describe what the implications are for us, the *people* whom God has loved, chosen, called, redeemed, shaped and sent into the world in the name of Christ.”⁷⁶ What spoke that premise is how much it seems to be missing from the contemporary Western Church. Congregations certainly value Bible study for its own sake and for personal growth and enlightenment, but all too often the study seems to remain theoretical.

Wright claims that a deeper study of Scripture will not only help believers understand the nature of the Church as it was founded by God and begin to grasp who they are as members of that Church, but the study of Scripture will also give them wisdom about how we carry out the work of the Church. Put another way, those who strive to be faithful disciples need to “understand that biblical theology and mission are integrally related to each other.”⁷⁷ The Bible is not simply a story about who God is and who humans are in relation to him; it is equally the story of how God has sent his people to be at work in the world. Wright draws the conclusion that the first disciples were able to go about their work precisely because they were steeped in the Biblical narrative: “Those first believers *knew the story they were in* . . . because they knew their Scriptures.”⁷⁸

To create even a small pocket of God’s Kingdom on earth, the local church must embrace the strengths it has been given without neglecting its weaknesses.

⁷⁶ Wright, *Mission of God’s People*, 267.

⁷⁷ Wright, *Mission of God’s People*, 20.

⁷⁸ Wright, *Mission of God’s People*, 36.

The hope of this work is that believers and non-believers alike will encounter God as they behold his Kingdom. This was certainly the hope of at least one of the gospel writers: “From Matthew’s perspective, to encounter the Kingdom is to encounter Jesus Christ.”⁷⁹ To encounter Jesus is to be brought into the Church universal and be transformed into someone willing to work to build the Kingdom. Thus the local church plays an integral part in God’s plan to reach the world.

Jesus’ ministry proclaimed the coming of God’s Kingdom. It makes sense, then, that the overarching mission of the Church should be to create glimpses of “in-breaking of the Kingdom of heaven here on earth.”⁸⁰ The markers of God’s Kingdom for the local church today are no different than those Jesus exhibited during his ministry. The good news that Jesus proclaims is that which God’s people have been longing to hear: “God himself is about to reassert his claim over the world.”⁸¹

What’s more, true disciples are naturally and powerfully drawn to live out their part in this story: “Mission is not a separate department in this earliest Church, nor a special endeavor; rather, it flows naturally from the believers’ common life in Christ.”⁸² Disciples are citizens of God’s Kingdom, and they instinctively seek to build outposts of his Kingdom wherever they are. Certainly they hope for that time when God’s Kingdom will come in fullness, but they also

⁷⁹ Donald Senior and Carol Stuhlmeuller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 237. Quoted in Bosch’s *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis Books), 1991, 71.

⁸⁰ Michael Frost, *The Road to Missional* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 30.

⁸¹ Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 173.

⁸² Humphrey, *Grand Entrance*, 51.

understand that “The church is *now* the eschatological people of God and a living witness of ratification of God’s promises to his people . . . a community of hope which groans and labors for the redemption of the world and for its own consummation.”⁸³

From the beginning of creation, humanity’s task has been to help make the world a better place. In the Garden of Eden, “God blessed [Adam and Eve], and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.’”⁸⁴ Ever since the fall, it has been the task of God’s people to build pockets of beauty and justice in a broken and fallen world.

In using the term justice, the local church should take it “as a shorthand for the intention of God, expressed from Genesis to Revelation, to set the whole world to right.”⁸⁵ Since disciples know this is God’s ultimate intention, they should take it as the task of their congregations to set as much right as it possible. As the local church works for justice and beauty, so God’s Kingdom will come about in the world because God “has committed himself to the total redemption and restoration of the whole creation.”⁸⁶

The Church’s goal should be to become missional, a “wholesale and thorough reorientation of the church around mission,” which is “more of a state of mind” than anything else.⁸⁷ Every aspect of a local church’s mission endeavors

⁸³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 169.

⁸⁴ Genesis 1:28.

⁸⁵ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 213.

⁸⁶ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 48.

⁸⁷ Frost, *The Road to Missional*, 16-17.

should be about “unfurling glimpses of beauty, justice, and love in our world by the means most appropriate to our circumstances, gifts, abilities, and desires.”⁸⁸ Without mission, a church is doing little more than creating an anemic pocket of God’s Kingdom in the hopes that non-believers will find it appealing.

Jesus embodied the mission of the God to the world, but God’s mission does not end at the Ascension. God’s mission exploded to the farthest corners of the earth at the Ascension because it enabled the Holy Spirit to be unleashed upon the disciples at Pentecost: “Jesus’ own sense of vocation extended to those who followed him. They were summoned to specific tasks, which had to do with his own career and project. The story of the Kingdom thus generated an appropriate *praxis* among those who heard it and made it their own.”⁸⁹

Believers, shaped by the storyline of Scripture, would do well to remember that God is at work, extending his Kingdom in amazing ways until the day it will be established in fullness. For the sake of this thesis-project, that means that God is at work in the community of Greenville, and he expects his disciples to join him in that work. Beyond obligation, congregations do themselves and their community a disservice when they miss out on taking part in the life-giving ministry that God is doing in our midst.

⁸⁸ Frost, *The Road to Missional*, 114.

⁸⁹ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 245.

The Sending Nature of God

The mission of a local congregation “is first and foremost *God’s own* mission. God sends himself before he sends his *ekklēsia*. There is a centrifugal force in God’s very being. . . .”⁹⁰ It is no coincidence then that God sends his people out to take part in the very work that he is already doing: “the witnessing community knows that it is called and sent, wherever it is. It has a clear sense of its mission.”⁹¹

Although God is primary in building his Kingdom on earth, that is not to say that disciples have no part in it. Rather they attain true worship through their “participation through the Spirit in the Son’s communion with the Father. . . .”⁹² Jesus mentions that he is sent by the Father at least 12 times in the Gospel of John.⁹³ So as disciples participate in Jesus’ relationship with the father, they are sent as he is sent.

One of the reasons worship flows so naturally in to mission is that, as James K. A. Smith articulates, “we worship *for* mission; we gather *for* sending; we center ourselves in practices of the body of Christ *for the sake of* the world; we are reformed in the cathedral to undertake our image-bearing commission to reform the city.”⁹⁴ Clayton Schmit concurs, explaining that “The *misseo Dei* and

⁹⁰ Parry, *Worshipping Trinity*, 46.

⁹¹ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 43.

⁹² Torrance, *Worship*, 15.

⁹³ One example of Jesus claiming to be sent is found in John 20:21, “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’”

⁹⁴ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 154.

the worship of God are interrelated, Spirit-led activities of the church.”⁹⁵ Schmit highlights the fact that most Christian worship literally ends with the church being sent to live-out what they have heard and experienced in worship: “the *sending* of the church into the active mission of God is a pivotal moment in worship. . . .”⁹⁶ Conversely, the gathering for worship should also be seen as “the conclusion of the period of action. . . .”⁹⁷

While God works in any way that he chooses, Scripture, tradition, and contemporary research all point to the fact that God usually chooses to work in the world by drawing his people into worship and sending them out to spread the good news of his Kingdom in the world. Worship, then, is not complete until it sends disciples out into the world to continue worshipping in incarnate ways. In that sense, worship never really stops: “In the fullest sense, every Christian is called to worship at all times in his or her life, and the Church is worshipping whenever it serves or tells the gospel or goes out in mission.”⁹⁸

To make this connection, worshipers must be reminded every week that “the *sending* of the church into the active mission of God is a pivotal moment in worship. . . .”⁹⁹ Christians have a duty to take their new perspective of the world and proclaim the possibilities of God’s Kingdom to a world so mired in darkness that it cannot imagine what it means to walk in the light: “We must tell them and

⁹⁵ Clayton J. Schmit, *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 55.

⁹⁶ Schmit, *Sent and Gathered*, 151.

⁹⁷ Schmit, *Sent and Gathered*, 161.

⁹⁸ Humphrey, *Grand Entrance*, 186.

⁹⁹ Schmit, *Sent and Gathered*, 151.

show them that the revolution, the justice and peace, the restoration of creation, will come about only if we are worshipping the true God of heaven and earth, the one made known in Jesus Christ.”¹⁰⁰ Wright reminds the church that because the hope that they carry burns so brightly, “witnesses of the resurrection *run* . . . [with] a god-given energy that can’t wait to get the good news out and to implement it in the world.”¹⁰¹

Worshippers are transformed by their encounter with God and sent out into the world to join in and bear witness once again to the work of the Kingdom. The work goes on throughout time and space because the church believes that “The message of resurrection is that this present world matters . . . and that, in the name of this strong love, all the evils, all the injustices and all the pains of the present world must now be addressed with the news that is healing, justice and love have won the day. That’s why we pray, ‘Thy Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.’”¹⁰²

One of the assumptions of this thesis-project is that congregations seem to have a default setting to want to invite people into their buildings and into their membership in a centripetal fashion. By working with an outside group as part of this thesis-project, each congregation will have a centrifugal force built into the thesis-project that will pull them outside of their own walls, echoing God’s call towards to the community outside our doors. Simply put, the two congregations

¹⁰⁰ Wright, *For All God’s Worth*, 133-134.

¹⁰¹ Wright, *For All God’s Worth*, 67.

¹⁰² Wright, *For All God’s Worth*, 65.

will not be able to work together without going out from their buildings to join in the work that God is doing in their midst.

Gifted to Bear Fruit

The language of God's Kingdom is not a New Testament construct. Chronicles makes reference to the nation of Israel being an outpost of God's Kingdom here on earth.¹⁰³ Although this understanding was slow to develop, it becomes clear that all of God's works, including his church, have a role to play in proclaiming the Kingdom: "All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you. They shall speak of the glory of your Kingdom, and tell of your power, to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your Kingdom."¹⁰⁴ For Jesus, membership in and proclamation of the Kingdom was so important that it was to be taken away from the people of Israel because of their failure to bear witness to it: "Therefore I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the Kingdom."¹⁰⁵ Subsequently, it only makes sense that "the major characteristic of the new Kingdom-of-God-bearing-nation that Jesus here foresees is – fruitfulness. . . . This way of living, in Matthew's opinion, will be the main missionary method of the new 'nation.'"¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ 1 Chronicles 28:5 says, "He has chosen my son Solomon to sit upon the throne of the Kingdom of the LORD over Israel."

¹⁰⁴ Psalm 145:10-12.

¹⁰⁵ Matthew 21:43.

¹⁰⁶ Bruner, *Matthew*, vol. 2, 382.

But God does not simply give the church a task, command us to go about it, and then leave us alone. He lavishes us with spiritual gifts, passions, and talents to help us flourish in our work. When God transforms believers, he does not do so simply to give them a gift for their own benefit, but to bring his promises and his Kingdom to fruition: “God’s purpose in Christ is ‘to create in himself a single new humanity’ (Eph 2:15) to fulfill the purpose of creation and establish his Kingdom.”¹⁰⁷ God plucks believers out of our sinfulness and gives them a purpose: “the practices of Christian worship are fundamentally ecstatic—calling us out of ourselves and into the life of the Triune God”¹⁰⁸ Spiritual gifts, then, “serve as the medium through which Father and Son speak to the church and through which the church speaks to Father and Son.”¹⁰⁹ In the dialogue of worship, worship leaders play a crucial part.

The present reality of a fallen world precludes a church from ever establishing a perfect representation of the Kingdom on earth. As N.T. Wright observes, “we do not ‘build the Kingdom’ all by ourselves, but we do build *for* the Kingdom.”¹¹⁰ The local church labors in the belief that “All that we do in faith, hope, and love in the present, in obedience to our ascended Lord and in the power of his spirit, will be enhanced and transformed at his appearing.”¹¹¹ The work that we do now may only be able to give glimpses of God’s Kingdom, but

¹⁰⁷ Torrance, *Worship*, 39.

¹⁰⁸ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 149.

¹⁰⁹ Parry, *Worshipping Trinity*, 154.

¹¹⁰ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 143.

¹¹¹ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 143.

we firmly believe that our labor is not in vain.

Even if the local church cannot hope and should not attempt to bring God's Kingdom to bear in fullness, they must be careful to discern the ways in which they are best suited to give glimpses of the Kingdom. Tim Keller cautions that "The spiritual gifts and callings of a congregation's leaders, together with their social context will necessarily mean every church tends to be naturally better at fulfilling some metaphors and doing some kinds of ministry."¹¹² While churches and their leaders certainly have specific gifts for various types of ministry, it does not mean that they can simply ignore the other aspects of the Kingdom. Rather "Every church must seek to be true to *all* of the rich images in Scripture."¹¹³

Discovering where we are gifted, what our passions are, and what resources we have been given to further God's mission is a crucial step in any ministry endeavor: "we can increase our effectiveness and our level of success, by learning how to use what is different about us, in a purposeful, productive, and determined way."¹¹⁴ Some have argued that "Five percent of what you are capable of doing only you can do—or only you can do in the way you do it."¹¹⁵ It is when these disparate gifts come together in a community that real change is able to take place.

¹¹² Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 293.

¹¹³ Keller, *Center Church*, 293.

¹¹⁴ Ken Tucker, Todd Hahn, and Shane Roberson, *Your Intentional Difference: One Word Changes Everything* (New York: Morgan James Publishing, 2014), 95.

¹¹⁵ Tucker, Hahn, and Roberson, *Your Intentional Difference*, 22.

This chapter has established that God is already at work in the world, that his work in the world came to life and was demonstrated in Jesus, that our sovereign Lord commands us to join him, and that he gives us gifts and resources to go about that work, but for some people this does not seem to be enough. Howard Snyder offers a critique to those who fail to heed God's call to all disciples, saying, "The worst sin is waiting passively for God to act, for God intends to work through us. Denial of our stewardship of the world is, in effect, a denial of God."¹¹⁶ Not only is a refusal to use our gifts a denial of God, but it means that we are missing out on the fullness of life that God intends for us: "God calls and sets apart a particular people to be the instrument of his healing purposes for the world."¹¹⁷ Jesus' design for his disciples is that they "were to be agents of the Kingdom, just as Jesus was, telling its story and enacting its praxis."¹¹⁸

One of the great tensions that exists in taking up our part in God's work in the world is that we will be able to see God's Kingdom around us yet never fully until he returns. One of the profound mysteries of God's Kingdom is that it is already but not yet here: "The phrase, 'Kingdom of God', therefore, carried unambiguously the *hope* that YHWH would act thus, within history, to vindicate Israel. . . the agenda, for those with watchful hearts, not only to wait for him to act, but to work, in whatever way was deemed appropriate, towards that day."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 109.

¹¹⁷ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 37.

¹¹⁸ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 303.

¹¹⁹ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 203.

The Kingdom is present here and now as a kind of counterculture to the earthly powers, and it is the hope of Kingdom citizens that their gifts are part of God's plan to bring God's Kingdom to fruition: "The genius of the countersystem model is its affirmation of God's reign as both present and future and as both individual and social. . . . God will conquer and the Kingdom will come in fullness, but the mystery of the Kingdom is that it comes now through weakness and faithfulness."¹²⁰ The exciting, and frustrating, aspect for disciples is that we see these two competing systems at work side by side: "We are equipped here to know that while the Kingdom is emerging, it will often look like a field of good wheat mixed with weeds. . . . we must leave the harvest judgment to God."¹²¹

We do not do ministry in a vacuum. We minister to people in a specific context, and we do it with the gifts we have been given with the resources we have available. This thesis-project required that the Joint Mission Task Force take note of its gifts and resources before it hopes to effectively establish an outpost of God's Kingdom in the community of Greenville, PA.

"Already" Ecclesiology

The church's mission is to use their gifts to build pockets of the Kingdom here on earth, but that will not happen without a committed community of disciples. The first thing that Jesus did was to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom, but the next thing that he did to actually begin the work of bringing that

¹²⁰ Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 84.

¹²¹ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 25.

Kingdom was to gather the disciples around himself into “a new form of community.”¹²² Jesus “created a community of learning and practice in which there was plenty of time to work out truth in discussion, dialogue, and application.”¹²³ While he was at work in the world “Jesus himself proclaimed the ‘(good news of) the Kingdom of God . . .’” and after he ascended into heaven, “This is essentially what the witnesses in Acts also do: the good news of the reign of God in Jesus Christ . . . and what he has accomplished.”¹²⁴

The Church is a representation of God’s Kingdom here and now in two distinct, yet intertwined, ways. In an existential sense, the Church is the Kingdom community on earth in its very nature. At the same time, the Church’s work is to build toward and give glimpses of a Kingdom that is not yet. Jesus “and his followers were the eschatological people of the one true god, and as such would be, in a way yet to be explicated, the people through whom this god would make his ways known to the rest of the world.”¹²⁵ The new community that came together to form the church was and is part of God’s plan to bring his Kingdom into reality on earth: “The corporate identity of the new movement belonged firmly within the world of Jewish eschatological expectations.”¹²⁶ That is not to say that the Church, with all its faults, should be confused with God’s Kingdom. The Church is absolutely part of God’s Kingdom but is not itself the Kingdom:

¹²² Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 246.

¹²³ Keller, *Center Church*, 312.

¹²⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 116.

¹²⁵ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 445.

¹²⁶ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 444.

exhibition of the Kingdom “is not the claim that the church either is or has the blueprints for the Kingdom of God. . . . Exhibition as witness points toward the promised Kingdom for which we pray and which God is bringing to its harvest.”¹²⁷

Bearing witness to and working toward presence of the Kingdom on earth is the Church’s mission: “The church carries out its mandated witness when it presents to the world evidence of that divine, healing, reconciling, loving rule in its life and practices now.”¹²⁸ It is not enough that the Church exists as a self-contained pocket of the Kingdom within the walls of the church building. Rather, “the life and actions of the members of a congregation when they are not gathered is the essential expression of their apostolate. This Kingdom exhibition emerges every Sunday as the members of the congregation depart into their respective mission fields.”¹²⁹ This kind of ministry is done by ordinary Christians going about their everyday lives as they allow the Kingdom of God to shape them and the way they go about their work. The mission of the Church is not always pretty, but it is truly present here and now, giving glimpses of what God has in store: “The Kingdom in the New Testament is not just a future glory but a present rugged reality struggling toward that glorious future.”¹³⁰

Such a hope is the backdrop for the church’s story. Simon Chan elaborates, “The church does not exist to fix a broken creation; rather, creation

¹²⁷ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 60.

¹²⁸ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 61.

¹²⁹ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 63.

¹³⁰ McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 96.

exists to realize the church.”¹³¹ This truth is so central to Christian identity that it led the first disciples to gather for worship on the day of Jesus’ resurrection rather than the Sabbath; likewise, “The inauguration of the new creation was what led early Christians to call it the Eighth Day.”¹³²

The Kingdom God has promised in many ways has become the new promised land that God gives to those called to be his people. John Witvliet makes the case that “The exegetical case for the linking of covenant and Kingdom is made on the basis of passages such as Luke 22:29”¹³³ where Jesus tells his disciples, “I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a Kingdom.” That which was given to the early church is the same inheritance we claim today: “We can make sense of what the church is now only because it exists in historical continuity with the church then.”¹³⁴ This is the Kingdom that surrounds and permeates the church. As disciples go about their work, “The impact of the Almighty is felt and seen, but in such a way that feeling and seeing are disturbed. To perceive that One is to know that perception is inadequate.”¹³⁵ Properly viewed, then, the Kingdom is both “an inspiring vision of the future” and “a life that can and must be lived now. This vision serves as a potent spring for active, costly discipleship in the world rather than either hopeless passivity or

¹³¹ Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 25.

¹³² Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 128.

¹³³ Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 85-86.

¹³⁴ Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 31.

¹³⁵ Humphrey, *Grand Entrance*, 21.

casual self-satisfaction. The gospel is possible in all its power, and that is a dynamic hope. . . .”¹³⁶

It is not enough for a congregation to minister to the hungry by telling them of the great banquet that awaits them in heaven. The Church is a part of inaugurating God’s Kingdom on earth here and now, and this thesis-project seeks to do just that. Two congregations setting aside their differences to make the Kingdom seen and felt, if only briefly, is what the Church was meant for and the mission for which it was commissioned.

“Not Yet” Eschatology

Jesus ushered in the Kingdom on earth and promised that what he began will be completed upon his return: “In the Gospel accounts, Jesus uses Kingdom language to describe where we are headed.”¹³⁷ More than just talking about the Kingdom, however, God is at work in Jesus bringing it into being: “the work of Jesus is bringing into being God’s whole new order, his new world.”¹³⁸ This is the undercurrent of human history. No matter what happens in the course of human history, the Kingdom of God is looming on the horizon as the destination for pilgrims everywhere, and “the church has understood that whatever else the Kingdom may be, it represents a fundamental hope for the future.”¹³⁹

When Christians focus too much on the Kingdom as a future hope, they

¹³⁶ Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 83.

¹³⁷ Rienstra, *Worship Words*, 126.

¹³⁸ Wright, *For All God’s Worth*, 78.

¹³⁹ Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 25.

“tend to see their calling as one of waiting patiently for the Kingdom or as solely one of working to rescue souls from this passing world for eternal life in the world to come. This view can make Christians indifferent to or fatalistic about social problems that could be changed.”¹⁴⁰

Knowing where we are headed gives the church a direction for which to aim and a context for its journey. This is why scholars throughout time have given so much effort to eschatology. One such scholar is Michael Horton, who writes, “Eschatology is attentive to God’s unfolding plot from beginning to end, and it answers the question, For what can I hope?”¹⁴¹ Chan believes that Kingdom is so important to the practice of worship that he argues, “The preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ is also the preaching of the eschatologically oriented Kingdom of God.”¹⁴² “The vision of the triumph of the Lamb in Revelation is a supreme picture of the culmination of the Kingdom and provides hope and direction for faithful living now.”¹⁴³

Understanding the grand vision of God’s Kingdom coming to earth has inspired countless disciples on towards the cause of justice. After all, “Authentic apocalyptic hope thus compels ethical seriousness. It is impossible to believe in God’s coming triumph without being agitators for God’s Kingdom here and now.”¹⁴⁴ Not only are Christians motivated to make the world a better place, but

¹⁴⁰ Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 38.

¹⁴¹ Horton, *A Better Way*, 125.

¹⁴² Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 139.

¹⁴³ Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 78.

¹⁴⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 150.

“the ascension tells us about Jesus’s continuing *human* work in the present— [it allows us to be] equipped for the task of justice in the present.”¹⁴⁵ Knowing that Jesus is working through its members to build his Kingdom allows the local church to accomplish more than it could ever possible hope to by its efforts alone.

The end goal of God’s transformational work is to further his Kingdom here on earth. Eschatological vision reminds disciples that “God is engaged in nothing less than the re-creation of all things in the image of Jesus Christ. God’s people, through lives of worship, are to be chief instruments in that purpose.”¹⁴⁶ Wright concurs when he writes, “the Messiah brings God’s strange purpose to its completion, so that all humans, not just Jews, can become God’s chosen people.”¹⁴⁷

For the Church, this identity [or code] that forms our core and gives us a glimpse of our promised future is rooted in the concept of the Kingdom of God. Theologically and ontologically speaking, “The church is to be a sign of God’s coming Kingdom, pointing people to a reality that is right around the corner.”¹⁴⁸ Far from being a theoretical construct, the real core of the church is grounded in the Kingdom that was already “inaugurated in Christ, is currently foreshadowed in his church and will ultimately be made manifest in a new creation upon his

¹⁴⁵ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 113.

¹⁴⁶ Labberton, *Dangerous Act*, 67.

¹⁴⁷ Wright, *For All God’s Worth*, 121.

¹⁴⁸ Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture*, 28.

return.”¹⁴⁹ The mission of our organization and our vision for ministry call us to “work to make this world glimmer with the light of the next, that those who have eyes to see and ears to hear may come to the King in this present age.”¹⁵⁰ The work of the church is to continue the work of Christ on earth, and he regularly pointed to his divinity by performing acts that give a taste of what the Kingdom will be like.

For Christians, the future reality shapes the way we go about our present reality. Just as Jesus’ actions pointed toward God’s promised future, our actions are called to do the same: ¹⁵¹ “To the degree that peace, justice, and reconciliation are realized on earth, these also may be viewed as Kingdom signs. The final goal of the Kingdom is peace and justice on earth and in all creation as God’s rule is fully manifested.”¹⁵²

The eschatological vision is the Church’s inheritance and served as a vitally important framework for this thesis-project. The final vision of what God’s Kingdom will look like when it comes in fullness demands that individual congregations look at their local communities and ask what is out of sync with the reign of God. God’s Kingdom drives the imagination and the passion for what this world could be when God’s people bring his Kingdom to bear on their communities.

¹⁴⁹ Rick Langer, “Toward A Biblical Theology of Leadership,” in *Organizational Leadership*, edited by John S. Burns (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 70.

¹⁵⁰ Langer, “Toward A Biblical Theology of Leadership,” 70-71.

¹⁵¹ Peter Greer and Chris Horst, *Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities, and Churches* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2014), 39.

¹⁵² Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 79.

Conclusions

The various aspects of God's Kingdom all have a critical role to play in making the Kingdom real for people who would never otherwise see it. Those disciples who seek to work towards this Kingdom must understand its nature if they hope to have a chance in doing their part to bring it to life. The Kingdom of God is where God's sovereign will is done, where incarnational, healing ministry gives witness to the Resurrection, and where members of local congregations use their gifts to carry out God's mission to the world in a way that is already but not yet fully realized. To those who take the time to understand what God is up to, "we must affirm that the Kingdom is *both* heavenly and earthly; *both* present and future; *both* individual and social. . . . The Kingdom comes *both* by divine action and human action, yet without compromising God's sovereignty."¹⁵³ This is the theology that undergirds the work of this thesis-project and provides the framework for the Church's work in the world. However, the work of theology is never done until it makes its way into the hearts of those who turn it into action. As such, these topics will be important ones to review with those who participate in the work of this thesis-project.

¹⁵³ Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 121.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his Kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”
—Isaiah 9:7 (RSV)

Of the many significant works written that deal primarily with the Kingdom of God, five in particular seem to speak well to the subject matter of this thesis-project. It is these five main sources that I will engage in this chapter, as well as several other supporting materials. This thesis-project is primarily concerned with connecting the theological reality of the Kingdom of God with the work of local congregations and helping those congregations make the underlying theological reality manifest in meaningful ways. The sources that contribute to the work of this thesis-project are those which illumine our understanding of the Kingdom and how the Kingdom can influence congregational ministry.

Jesus and the Victory of God

In *Jesus and the Victory of God*, N. T. Wright explores how Jesus viewed himself as part of God’s larger work of inaugurating the Kingdom of God on earth. Wright explores what Jesus meant when he talked about the Kingdom: “when Jesus spoke of the ‘reign’ or ‘kingdom’ of Israel’s God, he was deliberately evoking an entire story-line that he and his hearers knew quite well; [and] he was retelling this familiar story in such a way as to subvert and redirect its normal

plot.”¹ Jesus identified himself at the center of Israel’s Kingdom identity and redefined what it means to be a part of God’s Kingdom. This is crucial to understand for this thesis-project because it means that a congregation’s work in the world is vastly more complex than establishing some sort of theocracy. Wright offers a helpful summary of what was included in Jesus’ understanding of the Kingdom:

Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom is best seen as evoking the story of Israel and her destiny. . . . The story therefore summoned Israel to follow Jesus in his new way of being the true people of God. . . . The story included a great, climactic ending: judgment would fall upon the impenitent, but those who followed the true path would be vindicated. . . . [There’s a] readjustment of [Israel’s] worldview-symbols. . . . Behind [Jesus’] conflict with rival agendas, Jesus discerned, and spoke about, a greater battle, in which he faced the real enemy. Victory over this enemy, Jesus claimed, would constitute the coming of the kingdom.²

Wright goes on to address what this redefinition of the Kingdom meant for Jesus’ followers. Prior to the resurrection, the disciples could never quite grasp the implications of what Jesus was doing. The epiphany of God’s Kingdom story breaking into human history made a group of bumbling tradesmen into the fearless apostles who forever changed the course of world history. Consequently, “Any viable hypothesis about the meaning of the ‘kingdom of god’ must therefore show, at least in principle, both how Jesus reconceived and spoke of the kingdom, and why his earliest followers came to construe the extraordinary events of his death and resurrection in the way they did.”³ What new life might

¹ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 199.

² Wright, *the Victory of God*, 200.

³ Wright, *the Victory of God*, 220.

look like post-resurrection expanded the disciples' imaginations from the scope of a matchbox car to something akin to a Ferrari.

According to Wright, the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed is something much bigger than most people ever think about. Most Jews in Jesus' day hoped God's Kingdom would end the Roman occupation; Jesus told stories of a Kingdom that would turn human power structures on their head and end oppression entirely: Jesus "was announcing that Israel's god was establishing his kingdom in a way which would leave the self-appointed guardians of Israel's tradition outside."⁴ The Pharisees did not hate Jesus because they were afraid of something that they did not understand; they understood exactly what he was saying and were terrified because, if true, it would change their entire world. Jesus used the very story that the Jews loved most deeply to challenge them to think of their lives in an entirely different way: Jesus "refused to give up the symbolic language of the kingdom, but filled it with such new content that, as we have seen, he powerfully subverted Jewish expectations."⁵

This thesis-project takes to heart what it means to keep the real goal in mind when going about the work of ministry. N. T. Wright teaches that for Jesus, it was never enough to fight hunger by giving someone bread or to fight disease by providing a cure. One may have taken away the immediate problem, but no lives are transformed and the system is still broken: "One of the key elements in Jesus' perception of his task was therefore his *redefinition* of who the real enemy

⁴ Wright, *the Victory of God*, 327.

⁵ Wright, *the Victory of God*, 471.

was; then, where is his enemy was actually located; then, what this enemy's strategy was, and how he was to be defeated."⁶

For an outpost of the Kingdom to be truly established in Greenville, PA, it requires people's lives to be changed from the inside out. Jesus called people to turn away from the things that can never give life and drink from the living water that he had to offer: "Jesus' call to repent . . . was an *eschatological* call . . . and it was a *political* call."⁷ The call that Jesus places on our lives has real world meaning: it calls us to real world action for the sake of God's Kingdom. One of the great takeaways from Wright's book is that God's Kingdom is meant to show up in this world in tangible ways. The opening movement of the Lord's Prayer is for God's Kingdom to come and for His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven: "The [Lord's] prayer comes from within the very heart of Jewish longing for the kingdom, shot through with Jesus' own reinterpretation of what that kingdom meant."⁸ At the heart of the Christian hope is that, one day, there will be no distinction between life in God's Kingdom and life here on earth. Until then, the point of Christian discipleship is to make life on earth as similar as possible to life in God's Kingdom.

This inbreaking was exactly what Jesus was doing and what he calls his Church to be about: "When [Jesus'] commands to the demons were obeyed, there ought to be only one conclusion for the onlookers: Israel's god was at last

⁶ Wright, *the Victory of God*, 450.

⁷ Wright, *the Victory of God*, 251.

⁸ Wright, *the Victory of God*, 293.

becoming king.”⁹ The challenge for this thesis-project is to make God’s Kingdom real in a community that desperately needs it—to proclaim in word and in deed what God’s Kingdom means for our lives here and now. Jesus “intended to announce the kingdom in praxis, story and symbol. And, as far as we can see, he achieved these intentions.”¹⁰ The hope of this thesis-project was to announce the kingdom in such a way that people in Greenville might be given a glimpse of the Kingdom of God and that it might change their lives forever.

Kingdom Conspiracy

In *Kingdom Conspiracy*, Scot McKnight cuts through contemporary misconceptions by exploring what a biblically-grounded understanding of the Kingdom might mean for the church today. Like Wright, McKnight also sees the Kingdom as part of a much larger narrative:

If kingdom means a story is being told, then kingdom mission means at least the following: we are to enter into that story as the one true story of the world through conversion, and we are to deepen our participation in that story through discipleship; but we need to be reminded that conversion and discipleship are only partial as we live in the now before the fullness of the not yet.¹¹

The Kingdom is a story in which all believers need to identify themselves in order to give their lives and ministry a proper perspective. This is vitally important because it is within the setting of everyday life that the Kingdom takes root. It is not simply a program that can be transplanted from one church to the next. On

⁹ Wright, *the Victory of God*, 453.

¹⁰ Wright, *the Victory of God*, 474.

¹¹ Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2014), 36.

the contrary, “Kingdom mission remains contextual.”¹² This is one of the central messages of Tim Keller’s *Center Church*, which describes the importance of having theological vision to appropriately discern how God is at work in our midst. The concept of contextualization is an important takeaway for this thesis-project because simply taking something that has worked in another setting and trying to see if it will work in Greenville, PA, will not do justice to the incarnational nature of God’s Kingdom.

Perhaps the strongest theme of McKnight’s book is the centrality of the local church for the work of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is certainly a place where God is King, but the word Kingdom also implies that there are a group of people who come together to be ruled by that King: “The kingdom is the people who are redeemed and ruled by King Jesus in such a way that they live in fellowship under King Jesus. . . . Kingdom mission is about creating and sustaining that kingdom community, the church.”¹³ Although the purpose of Kingdom ministry is not to grow the congregations involved in it, there is a certain sense that those who have witnessed the power and glory of the Kingdom will be inexorably drawn to participate in the Kingdom’s community: “Kingdom mission forms communities of the redeemed. And kingdom mission that does not offer this kind of redemption is not kingdom mission.”¹⁴ As the body of Christ in the world, the local church cannot be left out of any equation that seeks to establish

¹² McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 53.

¹³ McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 99.

¹⁴ McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 158.

an outpost of God's Kingdom in the world: "kingdom mission admits the primacy of evangelism but sees the locus of the social dimension to be first and foremost in the church as a witness to the world."¹⁵

McKnight argues that the necessary presence of the church precludes Kingdom ministry being confined to social action alone. As much as good deeds may be done in response to God's intervention in our lives, the work of the Kingdom is always connected to God's mission in the world and is, once again, part of the larger narrative: "the public sector and systematic elements of social activism are not kingdom mission but instead Christians 'doing good' in the public sector for the common good. As such, this activism is good--very good and inevitable--but good works are not the same thing as kingdom work."¹⁶ In short, lobbying the government to care for the poor is never going to be a substitute for God's sovereign reign in the life of the poor. So "kingdom mission avoids the way of political power to accomplish God's will."¹⁷ To be clear, McKnight is not saying that it is never appropriate for Christians to advocate for social channels. What he is saying is that this is not a substitute for the witness of work undertaken by a local congregation: "Now a reminder: it is not good or just for the Christian to do this kind of social work at the expense of striving for kingdom conditions in his or her local church."¹⁸

¹⁵ McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 153.

¹⁶ McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 118.

¹⁷ McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 58.

¹⁸ McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 120.

This book is important to this thesis-project because it reminds us that God's Kingdom does far more than change laws. God changes our hearts and motivations for every choice that we make in life. The Joint Mission Task Force might have been able to convince the Greenville borough to make conditions more favorable for local businesses, but even if industries returned to the area and people had money, it would not have solved the overarching problem of their separation from God. If the Kingdom is going to be seen in Greenville, it must be through the work of local congregations bearing witness to it in their interpersonal relationships.

The Tangible Kingdom

In *The Tangible Kingdom*, Hugh Halter and Matt Smay address how contemporary problems might be answered by ancient beliefs. Halter and Smay directly acknowledge some of the problems faced by the church today, such as how roughly one-third of people who profess to be Christian in the United States are actually involved in a faith community on any regular basis: "something must change to reverse the trends. We need to start by doing some things we *haven't* been doing and we must stop doing some things that we *have* been doing."¹⁹ In other words, if we do what we have always done, we can expect to get the same results that we have always gotten.

¹⁹ Hugh Halter & Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 12.

There is an inherent struggle in trying to do things in a new way without losing the people who just want to do things the same, old way: “Tension also comes when you know you can’t go back to present forms of church, but you don’t know what going forward will look like or what it will cost us in life, focus, family, or finances.”²⁰ This tension is exacerbated in congregations where those who “like the way things are just fine” are also the ones on whom you depend for financial support. Halter and Smay observe that there is a “coming civil war” that will see the church divided into two basic groups: “‘Jerusalem Christians’ (those who see the person of Jesus through their traditions and the literal interpretation of doctrine) and the other ‘Galilee Christians’ (those who see the Christian message through the person of Jesus and the narratives about his life).”²¹ In order to delve in to Kingdom ministry, believers need to be willing to break with tradition and try things that they have never tried before. Halter and Smay observe that the contemporary church has all but reached the point where those who are married to tradition are more of a liability than an asset: “We used to be told that the number one indicator of a new church’s success is how many people they have when they start. Now we say, the number one problem you’ll have will be based on bringing too many people with you.”²²

Another critique that *The Tangible Kingdom* has of the contemporary church is its tendency to become isolationist. Chapter Two of this thesis-project

²⁰ Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 18.

²¹ Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 19.

²² Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 27.

explored the theological imperative to be incarnational, and Halter and Smay join in that chorus as well: “*Missional* has an inseparable twin. It’s called ‘incarnational.’ The root meaning of *incarnation* means ‘any person or thing serving as the type of embodiment of a quality or concept.’”²³ Although it is possible to create an outpost of God’s Kingdom within the walls of a church building and as a closed community, that was never what the Kingdom of God was intended to be: “Influence doesn’t happen by extracting ourselves from the world for the sake of our values, but by bringing out values into the culture.”²⁴ Making a difference to the world around us means interacting with and influencing the community in which we live. This does not necessarily mean that we should intervene in the culture in a parental sense as if we know better. Rather, Halter and Smay believe that “Our posture of how we communicate to them—that we are on their side and advocating for them—is how we enter their world. Instead of drawing a line in the sand . . . we step across from the religious side into their all-too real world and ask how we can help.”²⁵ It was critical for the work of this thesis-project to adopt this exact attitude.

This thesis-project is titled “Glimpsing the Kingdom” because, so often, people perceive that God is at work in their midst before they can see or even articulate their perception. Halter and Smay recognize this attribute of the Kingdom and see it as a sign of God’s action at work above church

²³ Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 38.

²⁴ Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 31.

²⁵ Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 43.

indoctrination: Gospel discovery begins “in a sphere in which truth can be seen before it is spoken, where a new authority figure becomes trusted, and where people are able to weigh Christ’s values over their own.”²⁶ While the western church has long valued things like catechism and having the right answers, Halter and Smay believe that it is more important to have a transformed heart and be in relationship with God in a meaningful way: The ancient church “figured that spiritual fervor in the wrong direction is still better than spiritual apathy in the right direction.”²⁷

The Tangible Kingdom also offers encouragement for those who find themselves ministering in a congregation laden with people concerned with tradition. Halter and Smay believe that it is possible to make a difference with handful of people who are dedicated to furthering the Kingdom of God: “If you realize that you are a part of a traditional-attractional church structure, don’t punt! The best response is to create the missional pyramid from scratch with a few missional people of your choice and start right where you are.”²⁸ This thesis-project took this advice seriously and planned to work with a task force of only a few people who were committed to meaningful Kingdom ministry.

Halter and Smay echo one of the themes that has been repeated by several authors who write that the Kingdom of God inherently leaves the security of the church building to engage unchurched people in their lives: “A ‘habit of

²⁶ Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 65.

²⁷ Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 70.

²⁸ Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 121.

incarnational people' the habit of *living among*, means *participating in the natural activities of the culture around you, with whimsical holiness*."²⁹ That is not to say that Christians show up in the lives of unbelievers to hand them tracts or tired clichés. No, rather "The basis of missionary activity is to make *no* assumptions. . . . There were no pat answers [with Jesus], no formulas, no one-time offers."³⁰ Perhaps one of the best lines in *The Tangible Kingdom* comes when the authors say, "I'm not sure what definition you use for *evangelism*, but my favorite has to do with 'changing people's assumptions.' To me, if we can dismantle their stereotypes of Christians as . . . [people] whose only hobbies are doing puzzles together, we're on our way to helping them see the Kingdom in a new light."³¹

This book walks the line between traditional church and social activism. Halter and Smay offer a both-and approach in which the church is lifted up as a crucial component of God's Kingdom, yet tradition is set aside when it is necessary to make the Kingdom real for the people to whom the local congregation is sent. This thesis-project asked that participants walk this line with grace and clarity to enable them to do justice to God's Kingdom in the community of Greenville.

²⁹ Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 136. Emphasis not added.

³⁰ Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 133.

³¹ Halter & Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 160.

The Kingdom Today

Anthony Bradley writes a chapter in *The Kingdom of God* called “The Kingdom Today,” in which he explores how God’s Kingdom adds worth to human life and touches the lives of the less fortunate. Throughout the testimony of Scripture, God is always concerned about the widows and the disadvantaged. It makes sense that God’s Kingdom would be built on the same concerns. Although God calls His people to join Him in the work of the Kingdom, it is God Himself who acts: “The praxis of the kingdom of God depends entirely on the activity of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and as such guarantees that the goals and ends of the kingdom will be accomplished.”³²

One of the most profound truths of God’s Kingdom is its focus upon those who are “lost.” Jesus said it is the sick who need a doctor (Mark 2:17), and Bradley reminds his readers that, in God’s Kingdom, disciples will take up the mantle of Jesus by going after those who need the gospel the most: “The full restoration of human dignity is achieved through the human person’s union with Christ. The praxis of the kingdom of God, then, requires the regular practice of evangelism.”³³ This is precisely the work of the Church—giving dignity to the “least of these” (Matthew 25:40) in Jesus’ name and for the sake of furthering God’s Kingdom in our community. The church is comprised of people who have had their self-worth redefined by the transforming love of Christ: “Love in the kingdom of God refuses to see any human being as anything less than the image

³² Anthony B. Bradley, “The Kingdom Today,” in *The Kingdom of God*, edited by Christopher W. Morgan & Robert A Peterson (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2012), 232.

³³ Bradley, “The Kingdom Today,” 233.

of God and so desires our neighbors to experience the liberation of being properly human both spiritually and physically. Human dignity, then, is the basis for genuine community.”³⁴

Bradley highlights how the interpersonal economics of the Kingdom operate in a way that is entirely contrary to the norms of the world. While worldly people operate from a place of self-advancement, God’s Kingdom demonstrates “a vision of a community where transitive reciprocity is normative. Passing the grace of God on to others enables people to live as reciprocators so that virtuous citizens may accept some individual responsibility for fostering their community, each one enabling reciprocity in solidarity with others.”³⁵ In other words, God has given us an inheritance *in* his Kingdom and we pay back his generosity by serving those who are *outside* his Kingdom.

This does not mean disciples are obligated to live in some system where material possessions are divided equally to all those in need. Rather, “What matters in the kingdom is that . . . every person is given an opportunity to live out a human vocation in peaceful solidarity with others.”³⁶ The work of the Kingdom is about what gives people worth and value rather than what gives them strictly material advancement. Bradley elaborates on this and argues that “Equality in the kingdom stresses giving indiscriminate opportunities for people to live lives of dignity, and though this may lead to material inequalities, it does not constitute

³⁴ Bradley, “The Kingdom Today,” 235.

³⁵ Bradley, “The Kingdom Today,” 248.

³⁶ Bradley, “The Kingdom Today,” 249.

the basis for injustice.”³⁷ The work of the Kingdom reaches much deeper and seeks to transform the human heart. Rather than simply giving money or resources that make the givers feel good about themselves without changing the lives of those being “helped,” the Kingdom seeks “to avoid a materialistic framework that tends to have little interest in human dignity or the right ordering of human passions. . . . Rather, from a kingdom-oriented perspective, we must ask better questions, being careful that any initiatives we propose are designed to meet the *real* needs of people on the margins.”³⁸

Bradley offers a corrective that was deeply needed for this thesis-project. With so much need prevalent in the city of Greenville, PA, it would have been easy to try to meet the physical needs and think we had made a Kingdom difference. God’s Kingdom, however, makes a lasting impact on those whom it touches by transforming what they love most, which is the difference between surviving and thriving.

Exhibition of the Kingdom

The final source that speaks to the heart of this thesis-project is *Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World* by Darrell Guder. In this final book in a series that discusses the Great Ends of the Church as enumerated by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Guder explains that “the ‘exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world’ basically defines the church’s missional calling and

³⁷ Bradley, “The Kingdom Today,” 250.

³⁸ Bradley, “The Kingdom Today,” 251.

summarizes the first five Great Ends of the Church.”³⁹ This exhibition takes place through everyday relationships where God’s sovereignty can be observed in the lives of His followers by those who are not His followers: “God’s rule takes place through the offer of relationship, the promotion of trust, and the insistence on accountability.”⁴⁰

As other authors have stated, the understanding of and witness to the Kingdom is something that has been distorted through the years. Before we can set things right, we must first recognize where they have gone wrong: “We have to deal straightforwardly with the many ways in which the Western Christian tradition has diluted, compromised, and reduced both the gospel and the church’s mandate over the centuries.”⁴¹ For whatever the church has made God’s Kingdom out to be, it is best understood by observing what it means when Jesus was inaugurating it in Scripture: the disciples learned through “the message and the model of Jesus what congruent witness would look like.”⁴² Indeed, the life and ministry of Jesus not only exhibits the Kingdom, they *are* the

³⁹ Darrell L. Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World* (Louisville, Witherspoon Press, 2007), 1. The other Great Ends of the Church, as enumerated by the PCUSA, are “the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; & the promotion of social righteousness.” These “Great Ends” were first compiled in 1910 by one of the PCUSA’s predecessor denominations, United Presbyterian Church of North America, of which Hillside was a member since its founding. Needless to say, the Great Ends of the Church have been a part of Hillside’s vocabulary for over 100 years.

⁴⁰ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 20.

⁴¹ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 48.

⁴² Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 55.

Kingdom: “The event of the gospel constitutes the content of its proclamation and establishes the method of its communication.”⁴³

Guder notes that, through God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, the global Church should have a very good idea what the Kingdom of God is to look like, although it is easy to miss for those who are not paying attention, “God does disclose enough of his kingdom rule to make it possible for humans to glimpse the wonders of God’s kingdom and then pursue it single-mindedly.”⁴⁴ As local congregations live into a Kingdom calling, they have the opportunity and responsibility to bring others along with them. Guder believes that when a congregation is living into its Kingdom identity, it is “inviting all those to whom we are sent to join us in the pilgrimage of witness that points . . . [to] what God is doing now in our midst.”⁴⁵ This message is available to people of every place and culture as the church bears witness in the ways that make sense to their local communities: “Apostolicity means the freedom of the Christian movement to take root and grow in every distinctive soil on earth.”⁴⁶

Finally, although the work of the Kingdom takes place in common settings amongst common people, Guder sees the ramifications of the Kingdom as having far-reaching and profoundly eschatological consequences. The Kingdom of God is the name we give to God’s ultimate project to set the world right: “the

⁴³ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 54.

⁴⁴ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 25.

⁴⁵ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 61.

⁴⁶ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 70.

in-breaking of the kingdom is not our project but God's."⁴⁷ Certainly we participate in God's project to the best of our ability, but this "kingdom project" is bigger than we human beings can even imagine. God is doing something so great that even the most ardent scholars can scarcely grasp its scope as it is on full display in Jesus: "the life and action of Jesus signals the turning of the ages. God's reign is engaging human history in a new way, drawing together all that God has been doing in and for his creation since Eden."⁴⁸ When local congregations take part in this narrative, they are joining in a chorus that began before the Church's founding and will echo through eternity: "The language about the kingdom of heaven is dynamic: it speaks of what God is doing now, what God will continue to do, and what God will ultimately complete."⁴⁹

This thesis-project is indebted to Darrell Guder for connecting the work that is going on in the small town of Greenville, PA, to the larger story that eclipses the efforts of any individual congregation. Guder also offers a warning to set aside contemporary misconceptions about the Kingdom in favor of the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated as it is found in Scripture. But above all, this thesis-project has needed to reiterate that the ultimate purpose of this ministry is to exhibit the Kingdom of heaven to the world in such a way that even casual observers have a chance of catching a glimpse of God's plan and purpose and being transformed by it.

⁴⁷ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 61.

⁴⁸ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 23.

⁴⁹ Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom*, 24.

Other Sources

One source that is of particular interest to how God's Kingdom has been proclaimed throughout the Church's two-thousand-year history is *The Triumph of Christianity* by Rodney Stark. Stark tells the story of how the Church has been engaged with the world around it for thousands of years and the fruit that the Church has yielded as a result. Stark observes that one of the primary reasons the Church wielded as much influence as it did was that "early Christianity had become overwhelmingly an urban movement."⁵⁰ In seeking the welfare of the cities, the faithful were able to attract nonbelievers to their doors because of the strides that they made for the benefit of the common good. Stark reminds his readers time and time again that many of the greatest achievements in human history were made by Christians living out their faith in their everyday lives. As just one example, "the central figures in the scientific achievements of the [Enlightenment] era were deeply religious."⁵¹ Stark argues that Christianity always thrives when the faith becomes real and tangible for people to see as it makes a difference in the world.

Conversely, Stark records that Christianity tended to wane whenever clergy failed "to propose a Christian lifestyle that was appropriate and attractive to ordinary people, and their failure to present Christian doctrines in simple, direct language."⁵² By that same token, when churches have "greatly reduced what

⁵⁰ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 158.

⁵¹ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 252.

⁵² Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 263-264.

they ask of their members. . . . This has always been followed by a rapid decline of their membership and a lack of commitment on the part of those who stay.”⁵³ In other words, when congregations cease to bear witness to God’s Kingdom by exhibiting a profoundly countercultural way of living, they cease to appeal to people who are looking for a way of life distinct from the chaos of the world.

One example of this comes from the early days of the church when Christians undertook the task of making the world a better place in simple but powerful ways. During its early days under the Roman Empire, “Christians met the obligation to care for the sick rather than desert them, and thereby saved enormous numbers of lives! . . . The fact that most stricken Christians survived did not go unnoticed.”⁵⁴ Most Christians were not doctors, so what they did would have been little more than bringing food and water to the infirm, yet those simple actions had profound implications, as they gave non-believers glimpses of God’s Kingdom. There were few, if any, miraculous demonstrations of healing power, but Christians knew that sickness had no place in God’s Kingdom, so they worked against it in what little ways they could.

Another work that has influenced this thesis-project is *Center Church*, in which Tim Keller articulates how to contextualize ministry for the congregation’s local community. Obviously, everyone would like for there to be no injustice in the

⁵³ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 359.

⁵⁴ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 117.

world, so Tim Keller cautions that it is “one thing to help remedy injustice; it’s another thing to go about it wisely.”⁵⁵

From the earliest records of the apostles’ missions to the Gentiles, the church has always tried to reach the world in a way the world can understand. After all, the apostle “Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.’”⁵⁶ He began his speech by finding common ground before moving on to the presentation of the gospel. Keller argues that to “successfully reach people in a culture, we must *both* enter the culture sympathetically and respectfully (similar to drilling) *and* confront the culture where it contradicts biblical truth (similar to blasting).”⁵⁷ This is exactly the kind of ministry that Paul was doing in his plea to the Athenians.

Tim Keller seeks to help his readers bring the gospel to bear on those in their communities by reminding them to speak the language of their communities. Keller observes, “if there is no single, context-free way to express the gospel, then contextualization is inevitable.”⁵⁸ As such, we need to be careful that we do not become insular in our teaching and worship style. Keller reminds believers that the responsibility to cross cultural lines is squarely on our shoulders and that we need to be bold in taking the gospel to people wherever they are gathered. Because more and more people find themselves living in cities, Keller argues that “there is nothing more critical for the evangelical church today than to

⁵⁵ Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 324.

⁵⁶ Acts 17:22.

⁵⁷ Keller, *Center Church*, 119.

⁵⁸ Keller, *Center Church*, 94.

emphasize and support urban ministry.”⁵⁹ Where the people of the world are, there is the mission field for the Church. Keller’s message can hit home even in a relatively rural place like Greenville, PA, by reminding the local church to enter into the culture and speak in such a way that local people can understand that they have a place in the Kingdom as well.

Another book that speaks to Kingdom-style ministry is *The Permanent Revolution*, in which authors Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim explain the need to “go deep into the organizational culture to unearth the controlling scripts, myths, paradigms, language, and dominant metaphors that make up their collective thought world.”⁶⁰ Of course, all aspects of the Kingdom are important, but each local church has a particular calling to carry out specific aspects of ministry in the community to which it is called.

Hirsch and Catchim also cite the important responsibility of lifting up other leaders and sharing with them in the decision-making process. The two authors describe a “cross-functional team where every person comes to the table with his or her own gifts and contributes to the ongoing development of the body.”⁶¹ They believe that a full blend of ministry gifts must be present in order for a church to be healthy or have any lasting hope for sustainability. In addition to making room for other gifts, the authors argue that believers must be given permission to use those gifts: “it is an act of enterprising, apostolic leadership to give social

⁵⁹ Keller, *Center Church*, 162.

⁶⁰ Alan Hirsch & Tim Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2012), 129.

⁶¹ Hirsch and Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution*, 21.

permission to people to experiment.”⁶² By unleashing the power of the group, the leader enables the church to accomplish far more than could be accomplished by the leadership alone. This concept is helpful to this thesis-project in that the thesis-project itself is bringing together a group of people who have never worked together before and asking them to function in an apostolic fashion.

Hirsch and Catchim believe that “the Petrine apostle is likely to be the one to remissionalize the church as we now experience it.”⁶³ This observation is a reminder that once again there is a biblical and historical framework to address the issues that face the Church today. Although congregations often feel trapped by doing things the way that they have always done them, these authors point out that the disciples “are not given a model, they are given a mission, and they will have to make it up as they go.”⁶⁴

Likewise, congregations need not be intimidated by not having an exact blueprint for how ministry ought to be done in the twenty-first century as long as they know the nature of the Kingdom of which they are a part. In reviewing some of the core tenets of the Kingdom as represented by the authors above, this thesis-project was able to move forward informed by what Kingdom ministry might look like in practice in the local community.

⁶² Hirsch and Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution*, 168.

⁶³ Hirsch and Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution*, 121.

⁶⁴ Hirsch and Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution*, 194.

CHAPTER FOUR

TASK FORCE—ASSEMBLE: PROJECT DESIGN

“Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw--the work of each builder will become visible.”

—1 Corinthians 3:12-13

Working in a community with severe economic and social hurdles is challenging in and of itself, but congregations do themselves a great disservice and diminish their effectiveness when they compound their problems by refusing to work with other groups who share their mission and vision for a community where God’s will is done. Furthermore, people within the community are far less likely to observe the larger picture of what God is doing in their midst if God’s people use their separate talents and ministries in isolation without ever bringing them together to demonstrate how those seemingly disparate puzzle pieces fit together to showcase God’s redemptive story at work in the world. It is precisely this kind of failure to coordinate that this thesis-project hopes to address. In many ways, this thesis-project aimed to build relationships and cooperative ministry endeavors for the sake of making God’s kingdom visible akin to how it is described in 1 Corinthians 3:8-9: “The one who plants and the one who waters have common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.”

Preliminary Considerations

In approaching the work of this thesis-project and in finding two congregations who would be willing to partner together for the sake of God's Kingdom, the logical place to start was with those who seem like they would make natural allies. In this case, that was the two Presbyterian congregations in town. While this was a starting point that, on paper, seemed to be a given, anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that those denominations that are least likely to work together are those who were at one time historically affiliated with one another. Especially within the PCUSA, denominational officials often seem more willing to work with people of other religions before they will work with other Presbyterian denominations, often because of the "bad blood" and inherited memories of past wrongs. But that potential tension made these two congregations ideal test subjects for this thesis-project because they represent a group of people who, by all rights, have very similar beliefs and stories, yet refuse to work together even in areas where they are in agreement.

Additionally, the tension that normally exists between two congregations who were once members of the same denomination is exacerbated by the fact that these two groups have a long and troubled history with one another stemming from economic and social disparities that have existed between them for much of their respective histories. All of this is to say that the two congregations chosen for this thesis-project were ones whose cooperation was by no means a "given." This is important to note because the community will be

more likely to notice when longstanding divisions are healed by and for working together for the sake of God's Kingdom.

Gathering the Team

As this process is, by its very nature, collaborative, I first began by meeting with the pastor of First Presbyterian Church to come to a consensus on the kind of people who would be best for the thesis-project. After reviewing the thesis-project's goals, we agreed that the two of us would personally invite two or three members of our respective congregations to participate based on a few predetermined characteristics. First, we knew that we would be asking people to do something that our congregations have never done before and engage in meaningful discussions about the Kingdom of God, so we believed that we would need people who have an appropriate level of spiritual maturity, with at least one participant from each congregation being an active elder on the Session (the congregation's governing board). Since one of the primary goals of this thesis-project is to encourage the two congregations to work together, we would look for people who are trusted and well-known within their congregations, who are frequent and regular participants in their congregation's worship, and who have the potential to encourage others in the congregations to join them in shared ministry. Next, we believed that because task force participants would be working together to make God's Kingdom visible to the local community, they should be people who are longtime members of and involved in the life of the community.

In our discussions, given the specific criteria that we believed would make for a successful thesis-project, we decided that it would be best to neither ask for volunteers to self-select nor simply welcome those who would be willing but not necessarily qualified. We believed that given the nature of small-town ministry and the virtue of knowing the members of our respective congregations fairly well, we were confident that we would be able to identify and invite those people who had demonstrated the gifts, aptitudes, and passions necessary to make this thesis-project a success. We agreed to spend time in prayerful discernment before we would approach those whom we believed would be positive additions to the team. We then explained the goals and parameters of the thesis-project to those we asked and invited them to prayerfully consider before giving their answer. Within two months, we had two or three members of each congregation who said they were willing to participate.

Interviews

Before the Joint Mission Task Force met for the first time as a group, I took the opportunity to sit down with each participant individually and interview them about the experiences, beliefs, and assumptions that they were bringing with them into this process. Furthermore, I hoped to establish the rapport and trust necessary for team-building and cooperation. I met with each participant in a local coffee shop located between the two congregations because it was the same “neutral ground” that I planned to use later when we met together as a team. I had learned that some of the team members had never been in that

particular coffee shop, and I wanted to make sure that that they would feel as comfortable as possible when we finally came together as a team.

After spending a few minutes getting to know one another or catching up, I asked each participant to tell me a little about their life story to help me understand who they are and where they are coming from. Before I asked any of the more formal interview questions, I assured each participant that their identities would remain anonymous to the greatest degree that is possible in a small town; as such, this paper will use code names whenever referring to a particular team member. We also discussed the negligible risks involved in participating and that there would be no compensation.

Impressions of the Kingdom

During the entrance interviews, each participant was asked what came to his or her mind when he or she thought of the Kingdom of God. Of the five who were interviewed, there was only one who viewed God's Kingdom as an entirely future reward where "your ultimate goal is to get there" (interview with "Miranda," August 11, 2016).¹ In this case, the Kingdom influences our life on earth only in the sense that "if we do right we are going to get to heaven and enjoy all of that." Two others who were interviewed also stated that God's Kingdom will come to fruition in an ultimate reward, but they, as well as the other two interviewed, saw that the Kingdom of God is here and now. One articulated that the Kingdom is "what we're doing here in our own space for God's work" (interview with

¹ All interviews were confidential by mutual agreement.

“Gonzalo,” August 10, 2016), while another observed that “we’re serving it as we’re serving Him” (interview with “Prospero,” August 11, 2016). Two people spoke of a belief that the Kingdom of God has to do with action on God’s part: “I think of His work here on earth with us in developing his Church, and that His Kingdom is here with His workers in all that we’re trying to do to be His light in the world” (interview with “Ariel,” August 11, 2016).

Two of those interviewed had the insight that observing God’s Kingdom at work was a matter of perspective. “Prospero,” particularly, spoke about this at some length, saying, “It’s faith; you can’t lay your hands on [the kingdom], but you see it at work; I guess it is tangible. We’re both [believers and nonbelievers alike] seeing the same thing, but through God’s Spirit that lives within us, [Christians] are seeing things [differently].” “Alonso” made a similar observation in saying, “you can actually feel it deep down in your heart and in your soul and when you can see things and look at them and know that that’s God; that’s reality” (interview with “Alonso,” August 24, 2016).

There seemed to be a concurrence that whatever the exact nature of God’s Kingdom may be, it requires some sort of action or response on the part of believers. “Gonzalo,” perhaps, captured the prevailing opinion of each person individually by saying, “Our kingdom is reality, and the reality is that we’ve got some work to do to help people come to the Kingdom.” It was unclear to the interviewer whether this and similar opinions were expressed out of a sense of duty or gratitude, but what became clear is that none of those interviewed verbalized a connection between the Kingdom of God and the sovereignty of

God. “Ariel” came the closest by saying, “We need to be clear of God’s purpose to love God and love our neighbors; I need to focus on being open to where God leads me, what He wants me to do with each talent that I have so that I can do my part to promote the Kingdom and to benefit the world through His love that we share.”

The Church’s Mission

Having discussed the nature of God’s kingdom in general, the next topic of conversation in each of the respective interviews was that of the Church’s specific mission on earth. This seemed to be a topic that the task force members were much quicker to answer, and all but one spoke directly about our role in helping those outside of the Church have some kind of encounter with Jesus. Interviewees said that the Church’s mission is to “Promote Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior,” “get [nonbelievers] to see and understand the Word,” or simply “bring people to Christ.” For these four, the spiritual needs of the community took a preeminent place in their thinking about mission, but their thoughts did not linger there long before moving to other evident needs. “Gonzalo” believed that it was important for people to know Christ first because once your spiritual wounds are healed, “maybe your other problems can be more easily solved.”

This leads to the next most common theme that carried through all of the discussions, which was meeting the physical needs of the less fortunate in the community. Miranda stated outright, “The work of this task force should be helping people who can’t help themselves.” But everyone seemed to understand

that the mission of God's Church must somehow include helping those who are in need of help, even when they could not articulate a mature theology as to why. Several people made comments about being a blessing to others. "Ariel" hoped "to make Greenville a more blessed, God-centered place" while "Prospero" explained that "to bless somebody is to be a bright spot in their lives and let them see God in me."

All in all, the team took seriously the challenges facing their community and demonstrated genuine interest with taking part in doing something about it. They all knew that cultural engagement was part of God's wishes for His followers and that God must have a central role in the work of the task force if it were to have any chance of success.

Resurrection and Its Implications for Ministry

Although the primary thrust of this thesis-project is making the Kingdom of God visible in the community, one of the great hallmarks of the Kingdom is that it is ushered in as part of God's new creation, which began at the Resurrection. Chapter Two of this thesis-project spoke at length about the importance of the resurrection and its relationship to the Kingdom, and the context of this thesis-project amidst a city where decay is readily visible means that glimpses of resurrection power must be visible in order for people to see the Kingdom at work. Consequently, all participants were asked about the implications of the resurrection for local ministry. This question gave the respondents pause, and it

became apparent that few, if any, of them had ever considered that the resurrection had any implications for ministry.

In getting into discussions about the resurrection with each task force member respectively, it was interesting to note that there were as many varying explanations as there were people interviewed. Miranda believed that resurrection was about “evil just being swallowed up.” Gonzalo said, “It was proof that there was a mighty, mighty God.” Ariel clearly believed that “Jesus truly came back,” while Prospero stated that resurrection refers to “our spiritual bodies.” Different still, Alonso felt that resurrection is about “a renewing of God’s faith in us.” These varied responses suggest, for one, that our congregations have not done a great job of articulating a clear theology of the resurrection and, two, that an emphasis on the resurrection is definitely needed if vital ministry is going to happen in Greenville.

Perhaps the most surprising sentiment that I encountered when talking about the resurrection was how quickly and how frequently the conversation turned to Jesus sacrificially dying for our sins. Although four people talked about the forgiveness of sins, for three of those interviewed it was the very first thing they said when asked about the resurrection. I would speculate that our need for forgiveness for our old life is an ever-present reality that confronts us daily in our weakness, but the need for new life may be something we struggle to imagine. Whatever the case may be, it seems clear from years of ministry in the Greenville community that it is self-evident that our current path and situation are not working for us, yet it is difficult to imagine how things might actually be different.

Still, the majority of the task force members saw the resurrection as a chance to turn the page as they employed the language of hope to speak of their desire for Greenville. Gonzalo observed that when death might have been the end, “the resurrection was the beginning,” and Ariel applied a similar insight in saying that “we have a mighty hope to give to others.” Alonso perhaps had the greatest hope for ministry in Greenville because of the resurrection, saying, “In light of that happening, nothing’s impossible.” For a community that has experienced nothing but uninterrupted decline for decades, that revelation is a powerful one indeed.

Hope Moving Forward

The conversations around the resurrection led to a final question about the hope that task force members had for this endeavor and for the community. The most common theme that ran through all of the responses was the desire to make a meaningful difference in the city of Greenville. Most of them did not speak of any generic change in the “right” direction; rather, they talked about bringing Christ to bear on their neighbors. Prospero hoped that this thesis-project would be about “working together for Christ in this community.” There was an undeniable consensus that, as Gonzalo acutely put it, “things need to change in Greenville.” This consensus, which each person articulated in different ways, also included a belief that the change brought to bear on the city should not be about infrastructure or programs but about people. Gonzalo went on to say that we need to lift people up in the vein of “teach a man to fish . . . make sure they

understand that they can take care of themselves.” Miranda expressed a hope to touch the lives of “people who are struggling and spreading the word of God.”

Undoubtedly, the most surprising theme consistent in the responses was the desire that participants showed in having the two congregations work together in a unified way. Upon asking for clarification about the relationship between the two congregations, Miranda explained, “People who were born and raised in this town know that these two churches don’t like each other.” As stated in the first chapter, historically, First Presbyterian was known as the congregation of business owners and upper management while Hillside was primarily populated by laborers and lower management. In coming to know the people of Hillside, I learned that the explanation, “their grandparents were mean to my grandparents,” was a very real and meaningful reason as to why the congregations not only had never worked together but had no interest in doing so.

To hear the task force members talk, it was clear that they acknowledged the broken relationship for what it was, recognized it as a problem, and desired for the relationship to change moving forward. Ariel captured the feelings of the team members most profoundly, saying that it was a hope that the work of this thesis-project:

unites Christians who have been divided by things that don’t matter, that it can lead to more and more collaboration between Christians in the Greenville area, that we become one community, and that we truly be a light in this community and that others look at the way we not only interact with them but with each other and say, “That’s what I want if that’s what being a Christian means.”

Hopefully, attitudes like this, combined with a willingness to overlook past offenses, have the potential to make a difference in the relationships of the congregations moving forward. Miranda echoed what Ariel said, adding, “I hope people can see the unity that we’re able to build.” This type of visible ministry is exactly how this thesis-project hopes to give a glimpse of the Kingdom to the members of the Greenville community.

General Interview Impressions

Overall, the primary impression that this interviewer took away from these conversations was the participants’ heartfelt devotion to their city and their desire to be a positive influence on their neighbors for the sake of Jesus Christ. Participants spoke about the challenges facing Greenville in a way that was neither fatalistic nor idealistic but rather realistic, with any hope they felt coming from the power of the gospel instead of their own abilities. As a group, they seemed to have firsthand knowledge of neighbors who were suffering here and now and who face life with little hope because they only know a reality of disappointment and decay. Although these entrance interviews did not show a strong connection between a theology of the resurrection or the Kingdom of God with everyday ministry, most participants believed that an encounter with Jesus would make a meaningful difference in the lives of the people of Greenville.

Furthermore, the consensus of the group showed a belief that a demonstration of unity between two congregations who had long been rivals would be a visible sign for the community at large. Having the goal of reversing

nearly two hundred years of adversity and competition between these two groups is no small task, yet task force members seemed undaunted and even excited by the opportunity to demonstrate that their love of Christ was greater than the divisions that have long prevented cooperation between groups that would otherwise be natural allies. Consistently, team members spoke of how the congregations would be able to accomplish so much more together than each might hope to on their own.

If there was any cause for hesitation moving forward, it might be the revelation that different team members showed signs of having different depths of understanding and differing levels of discipleship. This is not surprising in that the older members of the task force have nearly twice the experience of the younger members, as well as the fact that only some of the members have received training as elders. Still, there was a sense that some of the members of the group had a more thoughtful and educated faith. Initially, this might have indicated a potential problem, but it also seemed that those with a less developed faith had a greater degree of integration and understanding of the challenges facing the community. In all hope, these differing sets of skills and gifts will make for a perfect balance between theological thought and practical application.

The Work of Collaboration

As the actual work of collaboration got underway, the task force members met together for the first time in the coffeehouse located in downtown Greenville partway between the locations of the two church buildings. As task force

members arrived, they were intentionally asked to sit interspersed for the sake of creating a team dynamic and preventing an “us vs. them” mentality from forming between the two groups. Each member took a turn introducing themselves and giving enough of a backstory for the rest of the group to feel like they had an understanding of one another.

Next, it was important to me that the task force would have a meaningful, theological foundation from which to approach their work together, so each time we met, I led the group in devotions that were centered around some of the more important biblical and theological themes found in Chapter Two. Specifically, we discussed what it means to glimpse the Kingdom by studying Luke 17:11-24. The emphasis of this first study was on Jesus cleansing the 10 lepers and why only one, realizing the significance of what had happened, returned to give thanks. Although there were 10 who experienced the restorative power of the Kingdom, only one had the insight to see it for what it was. This followed with Jesus explaining to the Pharisees in Luke 17:20ff that “The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed . . . for, in fact, the Kingdom of God is among you.” The group discussed how easy it is to miss what God is doing in our midst and how this thesis-project may not result in something that is easily identifiable as Kingdom-ministry outside of the proper theological lens.

After the initial devotions, the task force reflected on the goal of making the Kingdom visible to the people of Greenville. I outlined the parameters of the thesis-project, noting that it is designed to facilitate collaboration between the two congregations for the purpose of discovering where we could work together to

make the Kingdom of God visible to the community. Any resulting ministry would be the fruit of this collaboration, but this thesis-project was primarily about the collaboration itself in the direction of Kingdom-focused ministry. I explained that I did not have an agenda beyond getting the congregations to work together for the sake of the community. As lifelong residents of this town and committed members of their respective congregations, the task of theologically-grounded discernment and ministry application would be theirs alone. After the prayer at the end of this first meeting, task force members were sent home to think about the possibilities and challenges that lay ahead.

During the second meeting, the devotion included a discussion of the nature of the Kingdom as it is revealed in Luke 13:10-21 and Matthew 18:1-5. This second study looked at Jesus being criticized for healing on the Sabbath and responding by rejoicing that the woman was “set free from this bondage on the Sabbath” followed immediately by his comparison of the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed or yeast, wherein the Kingdom is something that appears small and inconsequential, yet it grows to something that has a profound impact upon its environment. Team members recounted the city’s ills, giving primarily first-hand, anecdotal experiences of areas in which the Kingdom might have a meaningful impact.

In the group’s third meeting, the devotion took a look at the theological ramifications of the resurrection of the dead as illuminated in 1 Corinthians 15:12-32. The devotion and discussion focused on the centrality of the resurrection to the Christian faith because “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile.” The

group considered how the work of Christ, in establishing the Kingdom, is about subjecting “every authority and power” under his rule and will until he hands it over to God the Father. The task force members emphasized that our role as disciples was to help bring all aspects of our community under the reign of Christ.

In these early discussions, the task force came to the conclusion that by the very nature of collaboration, the group hoped to avoid duplicating another ministry that was already at work in Greenville simply for the sake of saying that we had our “own” version of the same ministry. On the contrary, the group hoped to identify an unmet need in Greenville that they would have a better chance of tackling together than they would as disparate congregations. If we were to have a better understanding of the unmet needs in the community, they concluded, we would need to speak with community and ministry leaders around Greenville to determine what needs were already being met and assess which areas, if any, those ministry leaders could identify that were in need of additional effort or support.

Next, the group studied the implications of Christ’s mission on earth as it is revealed in John 6:28-44 and what it means to be a blessing to our neighbors. In studying this passage, the team reflected on what Jesus understood to be “the work of God” on earth. The group focused on how belief in and of itself is a “work” as it seeks to understanding what Jesus’ life and ministry were about in raising up and nourishing the lost in our community. The team believed that this thesis-project should help the congregations to be a blessing to the community.

The fifth devotion looked at Matthew 21:33-46 and explored how all disciples are gifted to bear fruit for the sake of the Kingdom. The parable of the noble vineyard owner ends with Jesus telling his listeners in Matthew 21:43 that “the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the Kingdom.” The group discussed what it might mean that God was looking for a return on the investment that He made in planting the seeds of His Kingdom. Having already taken stock of the challenges facing the people of Greenville, team members inventoried the personal and financial resources available between the two congregations and how they might be brought to bear upon areas in which the need is greatest.

Community Engagement

In an effort to engage the community and discern where God might be calling the joint mission task force to serve, the team listed the most prominent ministries and agencies already at work in making a difference in the community. Once the different ministries and agencies were identified, team members divided the list in the hopes of speaking to the leaders of each organization and learning from them where greater ministry efforts might be needed and where our respective congregations might partner together to meet a real need in our community.

Once these interviews were completed, the task force met together to compare notes on the unmet needs within the Greenville community. As the group discussed what they had learned from their interviews, several consistent

themes arose. First, community leaders spoke of a lack of infrastructure to provide transportation to those who needed to get to meetings such as doctors' appointments and job interviews. As a relatively rural community, there is an evident lack of public transportation, which is keeping those who seek to better themselves from doing so. What little public transportation there is will stop services to recipients after three missed pickup appointments, which is not uncommon among those who are in the process of getting their lives together.

Second, one of the greatest needs facing the city of Greenville that emerged was the apparent lack of after-school programs and structure for the youth of the community. This seemed especially true for the youth in the "bottom-half" of society whose parents were on unemployment or entangled with the drug industry. For these youth, even having a safe and quiet place to do their homework each day was seen as a luxury, and there are few, if any, ministries or agencies in the city seeking to meet this need. The general consensus of the group was that this was an avenue that showed considerable promise as it had the opportunity to provide an alternate path for those who might otherwise adopt their parents' unproductive and fruitless lifestyles.

The third great challenge identified in our discussions was the rampant drug problem facing the community. As is documented earlier in this paper, the use of drugs and the growing opioid dependency is spreading at an alarming rate in the county, much faster than the national average. The group discussed how the drug problem might be a symptom of the deeper issue of hopelessness for

the lack of prospects for a better future and how the gospel of Jesus Christ might be the very thing that would help those who have given up on having a better life.

In the end, the group concluded that the area in which they could have the greatest impact for their effort would be in the area of engagement of the city's young people. While the need for infrastructure and drug awareness was real and meaningful, the task force believed that those areas might be too vast for the participating congregations to take on at this time. However, the team believed that interacting with young people might show them a better path, which would pay greater dividends in the town's future and have a greater potential to demonstrate the Kingdom to people who are still impressionable enough to change their lives moving forward.

Inter-Congregational Cooperation

One of the greatest long-term hopes of this thesis-project is that the collaborative work of the task force will extend into the future and grow into a healthy relationship of mutual respect and cooperation between the two congregations. Since First Presbyterian is a member of the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO), their denominations requires them to participate in a Mission Affinity Group with a like-minded congregation to encourage and hold one another accountable for the work of mission. They have indicated that they view this joint mission task force as the venue through which they would like to achieve their goal of mission partnership.

For them and for ECO, the Mission Affinity Group relationship is one of challenge and accountability. Groups engaged in this covenant process are encouraged to ask one another a set of questions found in ECO's "Narrative on the Health of Mission and Ministry."² Two of these questions deal directly with the Kingdom of God and one regards "seeking the welfare of the community to which you have been called."³ This partnership is a pleasant but unexpected benefit of this thesis-project as the relationship continues to grow between these two congregations.

During the thesis-project, the joint mission task force decided it would be a good idea to keep each congregation informed about the discussions happening within the group so as to solicit additional feedback about the unmet needs in Greenville. Team members believed that this would best be achieved by having a pair of team members—one from each congregation—speak during the respective worship services. The thinking behind this decision was that having members speak to their own congregation would be too easily ignored as business as usual, while being spoken to by two members of the neighboring congregation would give the impression that "they" were trying to tell "us" what to do. Speaking together, on the other hand, has the potential to reinforce the impression that our congregations are on friendly terms with one another. Hearing from a member of another congregation will get people's attention and

² For a full list of these questions, see Appendix B.

³ "Narrative on the Health of Mission and Ministry," ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, 2013, accessed November 5, 2016, http://eco-pres.org/static/media/uploads/video_4_mag-eco_narrative_questions.pdf00.

cause them to listen, and the message will be better heard because it is also coming from a trusted member of the congregation who is hearing it.

While this thesis-project is primarily about the collaborative process between the two congregations, the ultimate goal is that this collaboration will result in a cooperative ministry that will demonstrate God's Kingdom to the city of Greenville. This ministry will call for members of the two congregations, who might otherwise never interact, to plan, coordinate, and minister alongside one another.

At the time of this writing, the joint mission task force is planning to encourage the congregations to work together in ministering to the youth of Greenville. The discussions to date have included plans to have a joint vacation Bible school in the summer, shared youth group activities, and after-school mentoring. Whatever form this ministry might take, it will set a new threshold for cooperation between these two historic congregations. Furthermore, this thesis-project has set a tone for sharing and cooperation, which will be invaluable as the city's population and resources continue to decline. Further results and conclusions are found in chapter five.

CHAPTER FIVE

OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS

“Saints, before the altar bending, / Watching long in hope and fear; /
Suddenly the Lord, descending, / In His temple shall appear.”
—James Montgomery

This thesis-project set out to “explore the possibility of forming a joint mission task force with First Presbyterian Church for the purpose of collaborating on the creation of community revitalization efforts with Kingdom-focused vision.” To that end, a joint mission task force was established, and it did have Kingdom-focused discussions that led to unprecedented levels of collaboration between the two congregations with the goal of working together on community revitalization efforts. In many ways, this thesis-project has been a remarkable success and has, at the very least, opened a dialogue that has the potential to bear greater fruit in the future. At the time of the writing of this paper, the joint mission task force continues to meet, and all of the members of the group have expressed a desire to continue working together in order to make a visible and tangible difference in the community.

Results

Although participants in this thesis-project have been heavily involved in the community of Greenville for several decades, many of them remarked just how little they really knew of the extensive problems facing their community. Those who have been involved in this thesis-project have grown in their knowledge of the obstacles facing Greenville. Task force members now have

firsthand knowledge of some of the difficulties outlined in Chapter One because they spent time interacting with community leaders and reflecting on the plight of the city. The group was able to cover more ground together than either congregation could have individually because of how they utilized their various contacts with different ministries. Sharing the information they gained allowed both congregations to have more insight to use as they engaged the city together.

In some ways, taking stock of the many needs facing Greenville was an involved process that led to a daunting conclusion: there are more challenges facing this community than even two congregations could ever hope to tackle, even when they are working together. The task for the group became how we might be able to identify a specific area where our combined ministries could make a meaningful impact. This hurdle alone seemed to be almost overwhelming, yet seeing the need galvanized the group into the conviction that action was needed and that it was up to this group to bring God's Kingdom to bear on their community.

In bringing disparate groups together, conversations were held that never would have otherwise happened. These sparked ideas and solutions never before tried in either congregation. By focusing on the city, the task force was able to work toward meaningful ministry ideas rather than transparent ideas that were designed to grow each congregation's membership. In fact, never once during the course of this thesis-project did the discussion turn to getting people into either congregation's building or adding new members to their respective

ranks. In this regard, the hypothesis behind this thesis-project proved true: working together with a neighboring church will prevent mission efforts from becoming centripetal.

One unexpected benefit from this thesis-project was the way in which it challenged each member of the group to be at their best. As the moderator of the group, I observed that each member of the team was making an effort to put his or her best foot forward. Whether it was because they were trying to make a good impression on the members from the other congregation or whether they were simply doing their best to represent their own congregation well, each member of the task force carefully chose his or her words and made meaningful contributions each time he or she spoke.

Exit Interviews

Perhaps there is no better way to understand the effects that this thesis-project had than to hear from those who were involved in the task force personally. The one thought expressed by each and every task member was how much they enjoyed the work of collaboration and their hope that working together will result in the manifestation of a meaningful ministry to the people of Greenville. It is encouraging to realize that for members of this task force, their task will not have been completed until their faith is put into action in such a way that it benefits their neighbors.

Eye-Opening Discovery

Many members of the team spoke about how much they realized they had never known about their own community. Alonso was as surprised as anyone, saying, “I’ve enjoyed the meetings, but it’s opened my eyes to know how much more is out there for people to help—more than I realized” (interview with “Alonso,” December 29, 2016). Another team member, Ariel, came to realize how much various agencies are already doing to meet those needs: “I’ve learned that there are a lot of agencies out there meeting the needs, and the greatest need is the manpower to support them” (interview with “Ariel,” December 29, 2016). Still, Gonzalo framed both of these realizations in the context of what our team could do to help: “I’m encouraged by the fact that there IS something we can do if we can narrow it down. I didn’t realize how much there was out there” (interview with “Gonzalo,” December 29, 2016). All of these task force members expressed how much they learned about Greenville through their participation in this thesis-project and how they were glad for the opportunity to be a part of it.

Collaboration

Perhaps more than the realization of how much they had learned, all team members expressed their joy at the process of collaboration between the two congregations. Prospero may have shown the greatest appreciation for the collaborative process, saying, “I’ve been very happy that we’ve been able to get together and share thoughts and ideas about mission in Greenville. Getting together has brought up ideas we never would have thought of individually”

(interview with “Prospero,” December 29, 2016). What impressed Alonso was not simply the fact that two congregations had come together but that they came “together to come up with ways to help others.” Ariel, who had previously recalled the tumultuous history between these two competing congregations, said that this thesis-project is headed in “a positive direction, and I’m glad to see cooperation between the churches.” Still yet, Gonzalo remarked on how beneficial collaboration can be for us as individuals and as congregations, warning against isolationism by saying, “You can get stuck in a rut or stuck in your bubble and think things are just great and comfortable.” Being a part of a group with members outside of one’s “bubble” inherently helps to break people free from their normal thought patterns.

Personal Growth

In echoing what Gonzalo said about stepping outside of one’s bubble, Miranda remarked how doing just that has led to personal growth: “I don’t assert myself as much as I should, so talking to people outside of my comfort zone has helped me be more comfortable with myself. My spiritual wellbeing has improved as I’ve gotten word out to other people about our goals and what we hope to accomplish” (interview with “Miranda,” December 29, 2016). Gonzalo also made mention of how participating in this thesis-project paved the way for self-revelation: “Being with people who are thoughtful and intelligent makes me think that I have a voice, and I have something to contribute. You can’t help but grow when you are around other faithful people.”

Kingdom Implications

Eventually, the conversations turned toward the Kingdom of God and how their perceptions of the Kingdom may have changed during this process.

Prospero made note of how significant it is to be able to focus on such a significant topic: “Just being open and able to talk with other folks about things that are important – sometimes we just don’t have the opportunity.” Likewise, Ariel’s actual understanding of the Kingdom has not changed very much, “I can’t say my view of God’s kingdom has changed, yet [this process] has reinforced my standing belief that denomination doesn’t matter and that our community needs us to be seeking what God has for us to do and to show us what he wants us to do.”

Others in the group, however, did comment on their new levels of understanding. Gonzalo said, “I’ve always thought of faith as a comfortable, warm blanket. But when you see what’s out there and the needs that are out there, you realize that the Kingdom of God is not contained in the four walls of your church. And His Kingdom is not going to grow unless we get busy and get out there.” Alonso, who in the initial interview described the Kingdom as something you feel, remarked that “We are the kingdom, or a part of it. You can’t just sit back and pray about it and expect God to fix it; you’ve got to be proactive because we are an integral part of it—He works through us.”

Evaluation of the Project

In evaluating the thesis-project, the first thing to be observed is how many

moving parts came into play. Any group can have trouble coordinating their schedules, but creating a single group from two congregations required extra levels of communication that should have been foreseeable from the outset. Additionally, this group was then tasked with interacting with an entire community to find a need that could be met by a combined effort of the aforementioned congregations before mobilizing those congregations to engage and meet said need. To say the least, these tasks ended up being more involved and time-consuming than had been estimated at the outset, which is why the work is still ongoing and will probably continue for several years to come.

If there was to be one drawback learned from this project, it would have to be just how much longer everything took to get going than originally anticipated. At the time this paper was published, it had been well over one year since I first spoke about our two congregations working together on a joint mission project, and while there has been a great amount of discussion and laying the foundation of mutual relationships, there has been little done to make an impact on the lives of the least privileged in Greenville.

At least one lesson that others might learn from this thesis-project is that when one endeavors to change habits and patterns that have been learned and reinforced over the period of centuries, one should expect to devote several years to such an undertaking. A short-term project can scarcely do more than crack a window to allow a little fresh air to get into an otherwise closed ecosystem. Anyone looking to duplicate or build upon this work would do well to either establish a more reasonable time frame using realistic parameters or plan

to engage for the long haul.

Likewise, working partnerships take time to develop, especially between two groups of people who have long been adversaries. It's going to take longer than the timeframe of this thesis-project to form meaningful relationships between these two long-disparate groups of people. One of the challenges identified in the first chapter was the adversarial relationship between these two congregations. If anything, the two groups almost seemed surprised by how well they got along with one another. However, this cooperation was found amongst those who were already predisposed towards spiritual maturity and community involvement. A previous joint worship service between the congregations revealed that there were many people who were not willing to even worship with their neighboring congregation. And while the Joint Mission Task Force makes a great test case for the power of God's Kingdom to overcome human boundaries, it will take several years for the trust built by the task force to spread to the corners of each congregation.

With those drawbacks noted, I would otherwise say that this thesis-project has been a remarkable success. This thesis-project was born from a conversation that began by noting that these two congregations, who are not deeply involved in ministering to the needs of the community, never work together. In this end, the thesis-project has demonstrated that, when challenged, representatives from these congregations showed that they care more for their neighbors and more about the work of God's Kingdom than they did about defending their respective "castles."

Since this thesis-project began, these two congregations have worshiped together on a Sunday morning for the first time in their history and have opened a dialogue that has the potential to lead to more cooperation in the future. But more than just speaking to one another, those who have participated in this thesis-project have learned from one another, built friendships, and laid the groundwork for shared ministry to the community that looks to get started in the near future.

I believe one of the keys to success for this thesis-project lay in selecting participants who were already deeply invested in the community. Choosing people who have a great personal stake in the welfare of Greenville gave the group the impetus it needed to see the job through and overcome numerous obstacles. For that same reason, this thesis-project did not begin with any agenda other than to work together for the sake of God's Kingdom. While I moderated the group, I did my best to avoid influencing them toward what I may have thought was the right solution for the community. Greenville is their community, and I firmly believed throughout the process that the best solutions for the town's ills would come from the people of Greenville.

In the same way, while I had done extensive research on the challenges facing this community and communities like it, I did not, as an outsider, tell them about the problems as I saw them. Rather, I asked them to identify the problems, inventory their resources, and apply their insights in order to find a solution. I saw my role as leading devotions and helping to frame these discussions within a proper theological lens. The pastor of First Presbyterian participated in all group gatherings but generally held his comments until everyone else had already

spoken, and his comments were both theologically astute and locally practicable, coming from his decades of experience ministering in this community. The themes of the gospel discussed in Chapter Two related directly to the challenges facing the town and our hope for solving them just as the sin and brokenness of the world was countered through the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus.

In the end, I believe that the story of God's Kingdom—bringing order out of chaos and life out of death—was played out in this thesis-project on the stage that is Greenville. While the work of this thesis-project demonstrates promising results, the work of ministry in Greenville continues. And hopefully, local ministry will be aided by enduring friendships and partnerships that seek to carry out the work of God's Kingdom in the local community.

Recommendations for Future Study

As most denominations in North America continue to decline, inter-denominational and ecumenical collaboration will be increasingly important. As resources grow scarce, becoming territorial will lead to feral conflicts that will only serve to hasten the decline of those who desperately seek to survive.

Congregations who care more about the preservation of their respective “castles” than the service of God's Kingdom will see their decline in membership trail their decline in spiritual health. The twenty-first century promises boundless potential for the research and work of inter-congregational cooperation.

Whether it is two congregations from the same denomination or simply two congregations in the same town, I would recommend that the two groups

have a common goal to work toward and a common love to bind them together. While one might think that a love of Jesus and the work of His Kingdom would be enough, experience teaches us that geography, history, and sociology are powerful forces that should not be dismissed lightly.

I suspect that if I had tried the exact same experiment with a congregation from the next town over, this thesis-project would not have enjoyed a fraction of the success that it did. For better or worse, town pride seems to carry far more weight than denominational loyalty. However, I believe that the same process that was used here to overcome inter-congregational hostilities has real potential to overcome other social divisions as well.

Tangentially, I observed during this paper that our congregations have done a poor job articulating a clear theology of the Resurrection (or the eschaton, for that matter). I recommend that in the face of declining membership, the North American Church would be well-served by studying and reclaiming the doctrine of the Resurrection.

Final Conclusions

The opening chapter of this thesis-project stated the hope that, at the very least, this thesis-project would lead to a new level of trust and cooperation between members of the two Presbyterian congregations in Greenville. I believe that, if nothing else, this goal has been accomplished as this relationship has begun to grow and even flourish. Hope was also expressed in the first chapter that members of both congregations would come to the realization the many

opportunities that exist for joint witness. In this area, I believe that this thesis-project has been an even greater success.

Like many congregations, the two involved in this study find it very easy to become engrossed in the goings on within the walls of their own buildings. Working along the lines of shared interest with an outside group forces us to look outside of our own walls and become aware of the needs of others. It would be very difficult for those who have been involved in this task force to go back to doing things as they had always done them because they can never un-know what it is that they have learned about the desperate needs of their neighbors. Reading about problems in a newspaper cannot compete with the ontological impact of witnessing and hearing about those same problems first-hand.

Inasmuch as working with an outside group has forced these two congregations to face the problems of their community, it has also given them an ally with whom they may face those problems moving forward. Realizing that a group you once thought of as your “competition” cares as much about the same things as you do leads you to view them through a lens of cooperation.

While cooperation in the face of shared adversity may be human nature, this thesis-project has always been about something bigger, and that is the service of the Kingdom of God. The very reason for this thesis-project’s existence is not that struggling congregations ought to work together in dying communities or that we can accomplish more for our neighbors together than we can apart (although both of those things are true). This thesis-project has always sought to carry out the work of Christ in furthering his Kingdom on earth. If Jesus cares

more about the larger work of His Kingdom than the survival of a given congregation, then we, the members of a given congregation, should care more about doing the work of God's Kingdom in our community than we should about our continued existence.

In working together, two congregations are forced to care about those outside of their own congregations, and they benefit spiritually from this even if they do not benefit financially. In working together, we demonstrate to the world that we care more about God's Kingdom than we care about our local castles, and in the process, God's Kingdom will be more visible for those with the eyes to glimpse it.

APPENDIX A

POPULATION BREAKDOWN OF GREENVILLE, PA

The following is a graph representing the population of Greenville, PA. It demonstrates that the city has proportionally fewer working-age people and more retirement-age people than both the state and national averages. Having more people in need of services and fewer people able to pay for or provide those services places a strain on the local economy.

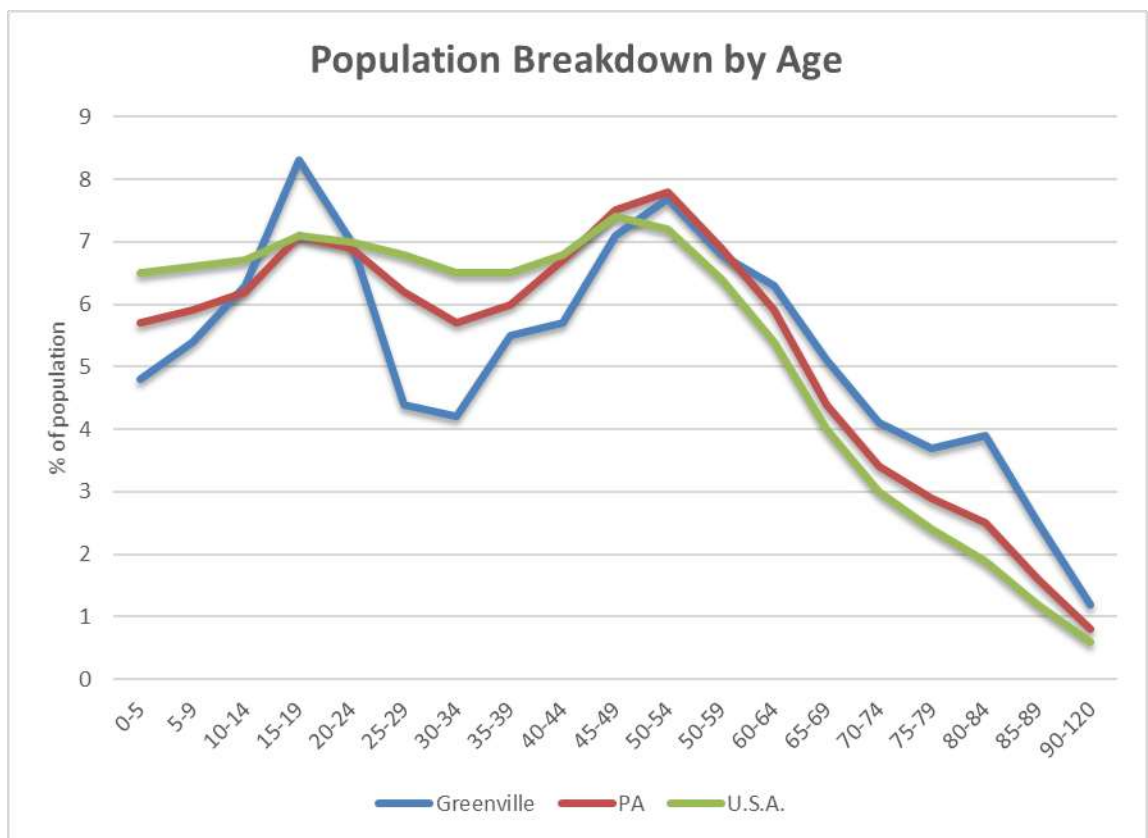


Figure 1

APPENDIX B

NARRATIVE ON THE HEALTH OF MISSION AND MINISTRY¹

These questions are used by ECO congregations in their Mission Affinity Groups:

1. How has the Holy Spirit been evident in your congregation in the past year — through conversions, growth in the fruit of the Spirit, or other transformational experiences that make disciples of Jesus Christ?

2. How has your congregation extended itself beyond its bounds through the establishment of new communities of worship and discipleship, expanding the Kingdom of God?

3. In what ways is your congregation seeking the welfare of the community to which you have been called — devoting itself to the poor, seeking justice, and living out the whole of the Great Commission?

4. How are you encouraging people to allow God's Word to shape their priorities and actions, and to nurture constant learning and the life of the mind?

5. How are you helping children and others new to the Christian faith to discover Jesus and grow in their understanding and love of God's Word?

6. Describe the moral expression in your congregation — are you more like the world or more like participants in the values of the Kingdom of God?

7. How is your congregation intentionally unleashing the ministries of women, men, and people of different ethnic groups who are experiencing God's call?

8. How is the idea of ministry as the joy and calling of every disciple evident in your congregation?

How are you equipping people to represent Jesus more effectively in their respective professions?

9. Illustrate the commitment of your congregation to global evangelism and discipleship, including examples of where you are engaging and with whom you are partnering.

10. How does your congregation understand commitment to the larger church through our connectional relationships within the Body of Christ?

¹ "Narrative on the Health of Mission and Ministry," ECO.

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